A HERITAGE OF HATE

CHARLES GARVICE

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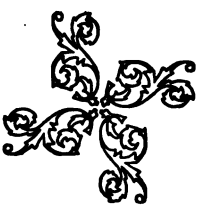
By CHARLES GARVICE



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A HERITAGE OF HATE.

CHAPTER I.

OUTSIDE a hut in the north-western part of Vancouver Island a lad stood and gazed at the sunset. It dyed the rocks, the trees, the ground itself a copper crimson which glowed as if it had fallen from some gigantic smelting-pot.

He was just seventeen; tall for his age, thin and lithe as a greyhound, and as strong as a blacksmith. His eyes were dark hazel and as bright as a polished pebble; his nose and mouth well and cleanly cut, and his face, framed in rather long and wavy hair, had something in its expression which was shared by the hawk which hovered above the hut, and the dog which sat on its haunches, sleeping with one ear open at his feet. That is to say, the boy was a product of Nature, with Nature's keenness, simplicity, truthfulness, and ignorance of art and shams. For so young a lad, the grim set of the lips, the unwavering gaze of the dark eyes, were extraordinary; indeed, these characteristics are generally found only in men who have lived alone in some vast solitude for very many years.

He was clad in moccasins, with boots of rawhide; the upper part of his body was clothed in a shirt only, and this wide open at the neck, displaying a broad, flat chest, as brown as his hands and face. He was engaged in splitting wood for fire kindling, and he had paused, axe in hand, to gaze at the sunset and to listen. Presently, as if someone within the hut had noticed the cessation of the swish of the axe and the crack of the wood, a voice called to him:

"Rath!"

The voice was that of a man—a clear, but low voice, with the tone which indicates a gentleman.

The lad drove the axe into a stump, and entered the hut.

In the corner, upon a rug, over a rough mattress, reclined the man who had called. He was very little past middle age,

but his hair, long, like the boy's, was snow-white, and his face that of a man who had looked at life straight in the eyes, and then turned his back upon it. Also, like the boy, he was thin, but his thinness was that of emaciation. In a word, the hand of Death had touched him, had, so to speak, passed over his face and was creeping down to his heart, which would cease to beat at the touch of the peace-giving fingers.

"Did you call, father?" asked the lad.

The man inclined his head slightly, and, with as slight a motion of his thin hand, signed to the boy to seat himself at the end of the rough bed.

"Yes," he replied. "I fancy the time is getting short, Rath."

The boy winced for an instant; then, as if ashamed of his display of emotion, set his lips tightly, and met unswervingly his father's brilliant eyes.

"Can I get you anything, father? Water?"

The dying man shook his head, and touched the can of water which stood on a stool beside the bed.

"No, thanks. I want nothing. Rath, I want to put you through your catechism for the last time. Are you ready?"

The lad shook his hair back and sat erect, his eyes fixed on his father's face with grave earnestness.

"Good! What is man?" asked the father in a low voice, clear at one word, slightly thick and husky at the other—the voice of one drawing near the Great Silence.

"A being who may be higher than the angels or lower than the beasts, as he chooses."

The father nodded, and was silent for a moment, gazing straight beyond the lad's rapt face.

"What is a gentleman?"

"One who fears no man, deceives no woman, loves the truth, and keeps his word."

The reply came promptly, but slowly and impresively.

"What is woman?"

"God's blessing on man—and His curse."

"'And His curse,'" he echoed, almost inaudibly. "Forget, if you will, all else I have taught you, but remember that, Rath," he said, slowly. "Remember that, and though you can neither read nor write, you will be better armed than the man who has acquired all the wisdom of the schools. Man's punishment and curse!"

He was silent for a moment or two; then he said, in a still weaker voice:

"What will you do when I am gone, Rath?"

The lad's lips quivered for an instant, but again he repressed all signs of emotion.

"Live on here, father. What else should I do?"

The man seemed to consider.

"Most men would deem me cruel," he muttered—"cruel and mad. They would say, Rath, that it is better to have played the game of life, and lost, than never to have played at all; but I cannot think so. You have been happy, Rath? Think; look back."

The lad's eyes grew dreamy and thoughtful, and he was silent for a moment; then he answered, gravely:

"Yes, father."

The man made a wide gesture with his worn hand.

"For miles and miles this is ours; it will be yours now. It is your world. You are, like the shipwrecked man I have told you of, the sole king. Nature, the only mother you have known, will give you all you need—food, drink, health, sound sleep. Up to now you have been happy, satisfied. Is it not so?"

"Yes, father," replied Rath.

"You have felt no longing for change, no restlessness, no desire to see other worlds, other men—women?"

The lad shook his head, his eyes still meeting his father's steadily and unflinchingly; and the man drew a long breath as if gratified.

"And yet some would deem me mad!" he mused, rather than spoke. "Rath"—he motioned to the lad to draw still nearer, as if the effort to make himself heard from even that short distance were painful—"Rath, while you have been outside there I have been asking myself if I should tell you the story of my life. With each alternate stroke of the axe I have swung between 'yes' and 'no.' But the 'noes' have it—"

It was strange how familiarly the parliamentary formula came from the parched lips of this man dying in the solitude of a remote island; strange the tone in which the words were spoken—the tone of one accustomed to the place and the occasions in and on which they were uttered.

—"The 'noes' have it, and I shall die as silent as I have lived. But this I will tell you, Rath, that my life was wrecked by a woman; that but for her—" He stopped, and moved his hand with an almost impatient gesture. "Rath, you have chosen wisely. Live out here your span of life, be it short or long. Heaven, in its inscrutable purposes, may send you a companion. If it be a man, welcome him, and, if he ring

true, trust him; but if it be a woman"—he leant forward, and his eyes glowed with the intensity of his emotion—"don't trust her, Rath. She may prove a blessing, but the odds are against it. Don't trust her, Rath. Keep her at arm's-length. Get rid of her at the first moment possible. Remember the story of your father's life."

"You have not told it to me," said Rath, with grave simplicity.

The man paused and passed his hand over his forehead, upon which the beads of sweat had started.

"No, no! Let it be buried with me, Rath. Enough that I have warned you. Our race has more than the usual reason for shunning woman. There is a curse upon us, and she carries it in her form, her face, upon her lips. Shun her, Rath, as you would shun the snake—aye, more earnestly; for the snake kills the body, but the woman kills the soul—the soul, Rath!"

The boy listened gravely, with the expression of one who had heard the solemn warning many times before.

There was a pause, during which the laboured breathing of the man joined with the breathing of the dog outside.

Presently the man said, painfully:

"Stand up, Rath! Let me look at you—for the last time."

The boy stood up, and the dim eyes scanned him, erect as a soldier, graceful in his self-possessing strength as the statue of a Greek god, and an expression of pride passed slowly across the man's face.

"Yes; you are strong, Rath." He stretched out his hand and touched the boy's firm arm, smooth as velvet, brown as bronze. "God's gift to man—strength. Use it well and wisely, Rath! Let none waste it for you—let none rob you of it. The island is yours."

His voice grew weak, and died away; but presently Rath heard it again, not speaking to him, but as if the dying man were communing with the past.

"Yes," he murmured, "safer here! Safe!" Then the voice recited the well-known lines:

> "'Oh, solitude, where are the charms
> That sages have seen in thy face?
> Better dwell in the midst of alarms
> Than reign in this horrible place!'"

His voice broke with a sob at the last words of the concluding line, a change came over his face; something like fear, a nameless dread, convulsed it. He leant forward and gripped the lad's arm, and staring straight before him, cried, shrilly:

"Don't let her come, Rath! We have been happy, boy, happy! Hide—hide! Don't let her see us! The curse, the curse of our race is in her eyes, and on her smiling lips. We'll hide, Rath; we'll hide! Quick—quick!"

In his excitement he rose from the bed, and stood swaying to and fro, drunk with weakness and delirium.

The lad caught him, and lifting him bodily, laid him gently on the couch, where the man lay panting for a moment or two; then his breath came more easily, and he beckoned with his eyes rather than his hand. Rath knelt beside him.

"Sorry, Rath," the voice said, faintly. "I should like to die quietly, like a gentleman. Is—is the grave ready?"

The boy nodded. His throat was parched, his eyes hot with unshed tears.

"Good! God bless you, Rath! Die—quietly—like—a—gentleman!"

A smile flickered over the worn face with a ray of the red sunset; there was a slight shudder, shiver, and then that awful motionlessness which tells that Death's hand has found the vital spot.

The boy's lips parted, as though he were about to cry aloud; then, as if his father were alive and listening, he said, hoarsely:

"I did not cry, father, I did not cry!" and he stood erect with folded arms and looked down with grim stoicism at the dead face, bearing his trouble as the dead man had taught him. And not even the sudden whine of the dog, which clave the silence, broke the lad's strange and unnatural calm.

CHAPTER II.

To the dweller in cities the solitude which now fell to the lad's lot must seem too terrible for words. His only companion, his father, lay asleep in the grave in the shadow of the tall firs which grew thickly over nearly all the island. He had no one to speak to but the dog; he could neither read nor write; could hold no communion but that of his own thoughts.

But Rath, though he had loved his father and missed him sorely, was not oppressed by the solitude which would have driven most men mad. Until his last few days his father had shared the work of the island, and now that he was dead, Rath's toil was therefore doubled. There was the corn patch to hoe, the cabbages to plant, snares to set for the rabbits, and always the fishing. The streams and small bays were full of trout, and at this season of the year Rath caught and smoked

them for winter consumption. The days sped by swiftly enough; but at night, though he made himself busy arranging the tackle and making bird and squirrel snares, he found it difficult to avoid thinking; and often he would let the wire or the gut slip from his hands and sit motionless, dreaming over the past. And it was such a small, unchecquered past; each day, each month, each year following the other, unmarked by any events more exciting than the capture of an unusually large seal or trout, or the arrival of a small band of Siwash Indians, who came periodically to barter furs and moccasins, cartridges and fire-water for the produce of the island.

Of his own history Rath knew nothing. He felt rather than knew that his father and he were gentlemen—that is to say, that they were different, and in some vague way superior, to the boat-load of men who had once come ashore from a brig, half tipsy and singing; that his father and he were, for some unknown reason, exiled from a land in which they would have been of some consequence; but Rath knew no more than this, and could form not even the vaguest idea of a city or town or even of a hamlet; though he had often listened to the Indians as they sat over the fire outside the hut on their rare visits, and had wondered whether he himself should ever see any of the strange things of which they spoke.

But though he was ignorant of men and cities, Rath had a keen and intricate knowledge of nature in all her moods. He knew the habits of every bird and beast, could track a spoor as keenly and as infallibly as an Indian; he knew how to find the lark's nest in the blue grass, and the squirrel's hoard in the hollow of the trees. He could scent a bear a mile off, and bring it down with one shot from his Winchester as surely as if it had been struck by lightning. He could shoot or snare the wild duck, and no trout could resist his fly.

To him every cloud had a meaning, and he was able to predict the weather for three days ahead, and his strength was marvellous, considering his years; there was not an ounce of fat upon him, all was muscle and sinew, tense and supple; it was impossible for him to fall into a clumsy or awkward attitude, and had a painter seen him as he dived of a morning from the rock into the sometimes ice-cold water, that painter would have known no rest nor peace until he had got the lad on canvas; for the strength was allied with a perfection of form rare indeed.

One night he had been sitting making a snare by the light of the oil-lamp suspended from the roof, and thinking of his

father's last words, his warning against woman, and wondering but only vaguely, why God had made a creature so dangerous and destructive, when the dog which had been lying at his feet stirred uneasily and emitted the stifled bark by which a dog shows that he has heard something in his sleep.

Rath, who had learnt to regard the slightest indication from one of Nature's children, rose and listened.

"What is it, Carl?" he said.

The dog, a rough-haired sheep dog which his father had bought as a puppy from the Indians, rose and moved slowly and shufflingly towards the door, and Rath opened it and looked out. There was a half moon, and its light fell softly on the sea, and pierced the mass of firs so that they seemed to stand up like gigantic needles against the sky. The scene was so beautiful that though Rath had seen it so often he stood and gazed at it with dreamy content.

Carl went out, sniffing at the ground, and made a circuit of the hut, but came back and lay down under the table as if satisfied, and Rath shut and barred the door and returned to his snare.

But though the dog seemed satisfied, a vague feeling of unrest took possession of Rath, and he found it hard to sleep, though as a rule he was off a moment or two after his head had met the rough pillow.

He fell asleep after awhile, but suddenly sprang up, awakened sharply by a sound as strange as it was startling.

He had heard, or fancied he had heard, the cry of a human being, a cry for help. With one hand thrust against the bed, he listened, with his head erect, his eyes fixed. He heard the sound again; Carl had heard it also, for he was standing stiffly, his ears pricked, his eyes fixed on the door. Rath sprang lightly from the bed, slipped on his clothes, and catching up his revolver, opened the door slowly.

No one was in sight, but presently the sound broke the stillness of the night. It came from the sea, and Rath, going quickly down the rise to the beach, saw a boat floating on the incoming tide. The night mist did not allow him to see who was in the boat, but the cry for help was wafted faintly towards him; and, running to his dug-out canoe, he launched it, stepping in at the moment it floated, and paddled towards the boat.

He made little or no sound, said not a word; and Carl, who had leapt into the canoe with him, lay silent also, peering curiously at the boat.

Every now and then the cry arose, breaking the intense

stillness; but after each interval the cry became fainter, as if the person who uttered it were losing strength.

Rath paddled quickly, but noiselessly, and presently he came near enough to see a slight figure seated on the midthwart of the boat.

It was a figure dressed like a sailor lad, and its face was turned towards the shore; a face pale and sharp with the anxiety, despair, weariness, and hope which filled its breast.

Rath, whose keen eyes had seen the figure before he himself was seen, felt stirred with pity, a pity more intense even than that which he had felt when Carl had once broken his leg.

With a few strokes of the paddle he sent the canoe along swiftly; the lad in the boat saw him, and uttered a cry of joy and relief, and half rose, supporting himself by clutching the gunwale with one hand, and shading his eyes with the other.

Rath ran alongside the boat, caught the edge, and stared at the thin white face inquiringly.

With a cry, the slight figure leant down towards him, both hands outstretched.

"Oh, thank God! thank God!" it said. "We are saved! saved! Oh! at last! at last!"

Rath's eyes did not move for a moment, then he slung the painter of the canoe over the thole of the boat, and stepped into her.

"Thank God!" exclaimed the lad again. "But—but is it real? Is it only one of my dreams? I have dreamed so often that we were ashore, that someone had picked us up! Speak to me! Oh, why don't you speak, and say that we are saved?"

It clasped its hands, and looked up at Rath piteously; and Rath met the gaze steadily for a moment; then, at the "we," he looked round the boat and saw that the sailor lad was not alone. Another figure, dimly outlined under a tarpaulin, lay in the stern sheets.

He stooped and drew the tarpaulin aside—then let it fall, and sprang back. For the figure and face were those of a woman. He knew they were, because he had seen pictures of them in the few books which he possessed.

He stood like a statue while one could count twenty, then solemnly, gravely, he stepped into the canoe, unfastened the painter, and paddled away towards the shore.

The lad in the boat gazed after him with an amazement which gradually gave place to despair.

"Oh, come back! come back!" he cried. "You are not

going to leave us? Oh, don't! don't! We shall die—we *are* dying! Save us! save us!"

The woman in the bottom of the boat stirred and moaned, and the lad turned to her in a frenzy of despair.

"Mother, there was some one who came—but he has gone. He could have saved us—but he has gone again. We must drift on the rocks, for I am too weak to use the oar now—too weak for anything!"

The small thin hands went up to the white face, and a cry escaped the quivering lips, as if it had forced itself out against the owner's will.

It struck Rath in the back, so to speak, and went straight to his heart; but he set his mouth firmly, and paddled away swiftly and steadily.

There was a woman in that boat, the creature his father had charged him to shun. The boat would drift into the current, the current would take her to the rocks on which no boat could live for longer than a quarter of an hour. There would be an end of the woman, which was right and proper, for why should such a dangerous creature not die?

It was hard that the lad with the pale thin face should die also; but—he shrugged his shoulders, a trick he had caught from his father—it could not be helped.

He reached the shore, ran the canoe up the beach, and called Carl. But the dog would not come. It stood on the very edge of the water, staring in the direction of the boat, and whining softly. Rath called it again and again; but, for the first time, the dog displayed disobedience; and though it turned its head in a pleading, apologetic manner, would not budge; and Rath, with his eyes turned resolutely from the dim figure in the boat, walked slowly but firmly into the hut.

He threw himself on the bed and closed his eyes, and with the phlegm born of his training and solitary life, even tried to sleep; but he failed in the attempt. The pale face, the voice so soft and musical, yet so clear and penetrating, haunted him.

"I wonder whether she will drift on the Mermaid's Rock or on the Casket?" he mused. "There's no harm in seeing. No; I'll not go. He'll cry to me to save him. Ah!"

He sprang out of bed as if struck with an idea, and, flinging open the door, turned to the beach and launched the canoe.

The boat had got into the current by this time, and was perilously near the rocks. The lad still sat on the thwart,

but his face was hidden in his arms. He was dazed by exhaustion, or paralysed by the approaching death.

Rath paddled up to the boat, and called:

"Hi!"

The lad raised his head and turned it slowly and with a dull apathy.

"Come in; step lightly," said Rath, bringing the canoe alongside.

The lad glanced at him, and then bent and touched the woman.

"Mother," he said, eagerly, "he has come back. Try and rise; he will take you into the canoe. See, mother. Ah! try and rise. Come!"

The woman raised her head, but Rath pushed off from the boat.

"No!" he said, sharply and decisively, "not the woman; but you may come."

Two great eyes shone like stars from the pale face of the castaway.

"Are—you—mad?" the indignant voice demanded. "Why will you not take her?"

Rath shook his head.

"She is a woman," he said, quietly enough. "I won't save her; but you're different. Come; the boat will be on the rocks in another minute."

The great eyes regarded him with amazed terror.

"It is all a dream; there is no one there," he said as if to himself. "It is only one of my dreams. Yes; I—I am falling asleep, and the end is near. We are going to die. Oh, cruel! cruel!"

The words cut Rath as if they were so many lashes. The blood rushed to his face, his eyes blazed, and he ground his teeth. Humanity was fighting against Prejudice within his heart.

Suddenly Humanity won. With something like the snarl and snap of a dog he bent forward, and with a long stroke of his paddle drove the canoe alongside the boat again, sprang on board, pushed the cowering lad aside, and, seizing the oar, rowed the boat round the rock. To do this he needed the strength of a Hercules and the skill of a trained seaman. Rath appeared to possess both, and the boat was forced away from the rocks to the shore.

The castaway sat and watched him breathlessly; then suddenly gave a cry, for Rath remembered the canoe, and dropping the oar, leapt on board.

The lad in the boat, thinking that their rescuer had again changed his mind and again deserted them, began to wring his hands and gaze at the terrible rocks; but Rath seized the canoe, slid in over the stern, paddled to the boat, made the boat fast, and once more came aboard and put the boat's head to land. The boy who crouched, shivering at his feet, looked up at him with a kind of dazed admiration.

"How strong you are!" he murmured, faintly. "You are just like a fish, or a great seal! Oh, I want to thank you —but I can't speak. There is something in my throat!" and he turned his head aside.

Rath said nothing. A lad who has lived on an island with only one companion in his solitude is not loquacious.

Presently the keel of the boat ran over the sand, and Rath jumped out and drew her well ashore.

"Jump out!" he said.

The boy stood on the edge, then staggered, and Rath caught him and swung him ashore; then he was actually about to push the boat off to sea again; but, with a cry, the castaway lad stopped him.

"No, no! Oh, indeed you must be mad! And after being so kind and noble!" he added, reproachfully. "Mother, come quickly! Lean on me. Quick!" he whispered, for there was that in Rath's face which made him uneasy.

The woman rose and staggered to the boat's side; Rath would not help her, but stood grimly with the painter in his hand; but when the boy and the woman were on shore, he pointed in the direction of the hut. But the woman was too weak to walk.

"Let us rest a little while," pleaded the castaway. "It is so good to feel the firm earth again; I could almost kiss it!"

Rath stared at him, then strode off to the hut—he rarely ran, but when he did he ran like a hare—and returned presently with a small stone jar which he handed to the boy.

"Give it to her," he said.

The jar contained the small quantity of brandy which had been kept for some such occasion; and the boy poured a few drops of it between the woman's lips.

It gave her strength enough to move, and she and the boy followed Rath to the hut. He flung open the door, not ungraciously, but with the air of one courteous on compulsion.

"I'll light a fire. She can have my bed—and there is one for you. I will give you something to eat."

The fire was soon burning brightly; the woman lay back on the rough couch which had been so lately occupied by the

woman-hater—strange irony of events!—and the boy busied himself in a weak and weary fashion in helping Rath, who, indeed, needed no help. The dog sat in front of the fire, blinking at one and another of the human beings with a grave curiosity and kindly interest. Rath made some soup and some corn-porridge; the woman was too weak and exhausted to take more than a spoonful; but the boy ate some of the soup, and Rath as he watched him saw a faint, delicate rose colour creeping into his face. Rath glanced from him to a small square of looking-glass which reflected his own face, and wondered at the difference.

The boy got up presently and stole to his mother.

"Thank God she's asleep!" he whispered.

He himself yawned as he spoke, and Rath—really as if he had been brought up in the best society—rose at once.

"I'll go," he said, gravely.

"Go?" The boy looked around. "Oh, I've got your bed! And I am turning you out. I'm sorry. Don't go. I'll sleep outside—anywhere!"

Rath shook his head.

"It's no matter," he said. "I often sleep outside. I've got a hollow tree. Stay where you are. The dog will stay with you. Bide there, Carl! If you should want anything to eat, you'll find bread and meat and some eggs in that cupboard. Good-night."

The boy from the boat held out his hand, and Rath, who had never shaken hands, stared at it.

"Won't you take my hand to say 'Good-night?'" said the lad, and a flush rose to the pale, tired face.

Rath took it—his own hand swallowed it up—held it for a moment, then, with something like a frown, dropped it and strode out.

CHAPTER III.

He slept for the remainder of that night in a hollow tree; but his sleep was an uneasy and broken one. He heard the faint but clear cry of the lad; was haunted by the despairing eyes; felt the touch of the small hand. When he woke in the morning, he went slowly to the hut. Carl came out to meet him; the castaway boy was standing at the door, looking out at the sunlit sea with a hand shading his eyes. At the sight of Rath he gave a little cry of relief and pleasure.

"Oh, I'm so glad to see you!" he said.

"Why?" asked Rath, with a stare.

The boy seemed to hesitate.

"Oh—why, I thought perhaps you had gone quite away. But you haven't; so I'm glad. See? Come in—I've got the breakfast—but come quietly. My mother is still asleep."

Rath entered. The iron kettle was bubbling on the fire. The boy had found the tea-pot, the bread, the butter; had toasted some meat; in short, had prepared the breakfast.

"I should have done this," said Rath. "You are very clever."

The boy laughed softly, then checked himself, and glancing at the sleeping woman, said:

"Let us come outside; it is so warm and beautiful in the sun. I was out quite early this morning. I—I wanted to see whether you had gone away. Help me carry some of the things."

Rath obeyed silently. It seemed to him that though this boy was smaller and younger than himself, that he was—well, taking the leading part in this game.

"Put them down here," said the boy. "Now let us sit down. I have found some sugar. Do you take any?"

Rath nodded. The young visitor poured out tea and handed the cup to Rath, then watched him covertly as he ate his breakfast, and presently drew a very faint little sigh of relief. Why? Because Rath, though apparently the only human being on a savage island, ate and drank like a gentleman.

Presently the boy, whose appetite appeared to be quickly appeased, lay on his side, and looking up to Rath, said in a half-lazy, half-commanding tone:

"What is the name of this island? It is an island, I suppose?"

Rath nodded.

"Yes. It is called the Isle of Refuge."

The other stared.

"I never heard of it. It sounds strange—as if there was a story attached to it. Is there?"

Rath shook his head.

"I don't know."

"Who called it that?"

"My father; it belonged to him."

The castaway glanced round half curiously, half apprehensively.

"He is dead," said Rath, gravely. "It belongs to me now."

The boy stared thoughtfully.

"How—how romantic! Is it a big island?"

"You can walk round it," said Rath. "At least," with a glance at the slight figure beside him, "I can."

"Oh, I'm not so weak as—as I look," said the other, with a little elevation of the chin. "And is there anyone else living here? But, of course, there must be!"

Rath shook his head.

"There is no one else."

The castaway raised himself on his elbow and stared at the bronzed, handsome face.

"What!" he muttered, aghast. "You—you have lived here alone! Oh, surely not *alone?*"

"Yes; since my father died," said Rath, with some surprise. "Why not? There was never more than us two."

The castaway boy had grey eyes—eyes that changed to violet sometimes—and they were violet now with the pity and the wonder that swam in them.

"Oh!" he breathed, softly. "How—how dreadful! I can't realise— And what did you do—all day, I mean—with your time?"

"There was, there is, plenty to do," said Rath, quietly. "To live, one must eat; to eat, one must work. We both worked at our own work. Now I do all."

His head sank. Strangely enough, he had never missed his father so much as he did at this moment.

"And in the evening, in the long winter nights, when it was too dark to work, what did you do? Read and write, I suppose?"

Rath shook his head.

"I cannot read or write," he said, calmly.

The castaway stared.

"What! Can't— Oh, I beg your pardon. And yet— But you are a—a gentleman."

"Yes, I know," said Rath, with a sublime placidity. "But my father said that one could be a gentleman, and yet be ignorant of reading and writing."

The deep grey eyes rested on him as if their owner was too puzzled for words.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"Rath Rayne," replied Rath.

The castaway repeated it.

"'Rath Rayne.' I like it."

"What is yours?" asked Rath, but with no great display of curiosity.

The boy did not appear to hear. He was dreamily pluck-

ing at the grass which cropped up through the sun-warmed sand.

"And how long have you been here?"

"Ever since I can remember," replied Rath.

"Born here?"

"I don't know. Perhaps." He looked thoughtfully seaward. "N-o; I don't think so."

The other eyed him curiously.

"There's one other question I should like to ask, but—but—well, I don't know whether you'd like it."

"Ask it. I won't answer if I don't like."

"Well, then, why didn't you want to save my mother yesterday?"

Rath thought a moment.

"I won't answer," he said.

The boy pouted and coloured.

"I think you're very rude," he said. "I thought you were mad."

Rath smiled grimly.

"Because I left you? I daresay. But think what you like. I didn't want the woman; but I'm glad to have you, though you are very small and weak, I should think."

The castaway's eyes opened widely.

"Oh, really!"

Rath bent towards him and took the hand that had been plucking the grass and held it, examining it with a half-contemptuous, half-wondering smile.

"Yes, you are very small, and your hand is ridiculously soft. Look at the nails—small and pink!"

The castaway's eyes flashed, and he snatched it away.

"And your face is small, too, and pale, and—and strange in some way. It's not a bit like mine."

"I should hope not," retorted the other, spitefully.

"And your hair is soft and silky, and all in little waves and curls—quite unlike mine or my father's; and your voice is like a bird's. You're different in every way, somehow. But still, I'm glad you've come. I don't mind *you*, a boy."

The castaway grew crimson, and the lids of the deep grey eyes fell, then rose, then fell slowly again. Looking through the long, dark lashes, as through a veil, he said, with amazement:

"But—but I'm not a boy. *I'm a girl!*"

Rath had reached forward to grasp and examine his companion's shoulder; but at the words he drew his hand away as if from a snake; his mouth opened, then set sternly, and

slowly he rose and backed away from the prone figure; backed for a couple of yards; then turned, and strode rapidly out of sight into the wood.

CHAPTER IV.

THE girl—for such she had now declared herself—raised herself on her elbow, and stared after the retreating figure of the lad with an amazement which gradually changed to something like shame and indignation; the colour deepened in her pale face until it burned a hot crimson, her breath came painfully, and her bosom rose and fell.

The young man's reception of her piece of information was nothing more nor less than an insult to her sex, and her blood was all a-tingle under it. That a man should fly her presence because he had discovered that she was a girl and not a boy—should fly from her as if she were something poisonous or pestilential—was not only surprising, but absolutely outrageous. The tears of vexation rose to her clear eyes, and the delicately cut lips quivered; but she dashed the tears away with an angry gesture, and set her mouth firmly and tightly.

"Very well! Let him go! He is mad; yes, that is what it is! He is mad! Living all alone here has turned his brain. Didn't Robinson Crusoe go mad because of the solitude? I think so; I don't quite recollect, but I think so. Anyhow, there is no other way of explaining such insulting conduct; but he need not be afraid. I sha'n't call after him. I don't care if I never see him again!"

She sat up and encircled her knees with her bare arms, and stared straight in front of her.

It is scarcely necessary to say that she expected Rath to come back, to creep back shyly, awkwardly, with an apology, or, at any rate, an explanation; and the delicate shell-like ears were, so to speak, pricked up, and the grey eyes began to waver in their direct gaze seaward, and to glance sideways. But as time passed and the insulting young man did not return, as there was no sight nor sound of him, she began to grow less inflexible; the curves of the sweet lips deepened, the eyelids quivered, and something very much like tears began to gather in the now violet eyes.

She was beginning to feel lonely. The terrible solitude, which was but to Rath the natural condition of things, commenced to tell upon her. The very tea-pot and plates reminded her of her lonely condition, and she turned away a little so that she might not see them; for they spoke all too

plainly of the lad who had apparently left her helpless on this savage island.

Presently the silence, the solitude, which the very beauty of the scene only accentuated, became intolerable. She rose, and still glancing out of the corner of her eyes for him, went to the hut.

The woman, whom Rath had so reluctantly rescued, was lying back in the rough chair, her hands resting limply in her lap, her hair only partially gathered up.

She was still young, but a wreck. The once beautiful face was thin and worn into lines and hollows, the dark eyes sunken, apathetic, and spiritless; and the delicately cut lips —glancing at them one could see where the girl's came from —drooped despondently. She raised the dark eyes as if with an effort as the girl entered the hut, but uttered no word of love or thanksgiving for their rescued lives.

"Where have you been, Stella?" she asked, not only faintly, but in the dull tones of one almost too weary and apathetic to care whether she were alive or dead.

Stella went to her and stroked one of the thin but exquisitely shaped hands.

"You were asleep, mother, and I went outside lest we should awaken you."

"We? Ah! I remember—or was it a dream? How did we come here? I cannot remember anything since the vessel went down and we floated away."

The girl explained in short sentences, but gently, smoothly, as if to give the woman time to grasp the situation.

"We were saved by a young man, mother. He rowed us ashore—you remember! But, ah! no, you had fainted. Poor mother! It is a desolate island—no, not desolate, for there is someone living here. See, mother, we are in a hut."

The woman looked round as if she saw it for the first time.

"Where are the people who brought us here, to whom it belongs?" she asked.

"There are no people. There is only a lad."

Her mother looked at her vaguely.

"Only a lad—the young man who came out to us in the canoe. He is all alone—his father died not long ago, I think —this is his hut."

The woman regarded her dully, with scarcely a sign of surprise or interest.

"Bring him to me, Stella," she said, speaking in the tone of one accustomed to issuing a command and having it obeyed.

The crimson rose to Stella's face.

"I—I can't, mother. He has gone."

"Gone? Where? To obtain help, assistance for us?"

The girl hung her head, and her brows came together.

"N-o. He—he was offended, angry. We were talking together, and he got up and left me suddenly, without any reason. Yes, there was a reason. He—he thought I was a boy, and he was kind and friendly enough first, until I told him that I was a girl"—the blush stained her face again, and then left it pale—"then he went off as if—as if he were angry, disgusted."

"Is he mad?" asked her mother; but with only a mild wonder.

Stella looked up as if she would have been glad to accept the explanation; but her eyes fell again, and she shook her head.

"No, he is not mad; he is as sane as we are. For some reason he does not—does not like girls—women."

She did not tell her mother that Rath had wanted to abandon her last night.

"I don't understand you; you are talking nonsense, Stella," said the woman, wearily; and she closed her eyes.

"It sounds like it, I admit," assented Stella, with a rueful little smile. "But it's true enough. He has gone, and we are left here alone."

She looked round with a sigh.

"Go in search of him at once," said her mother in a hoarse whisper.

The girl's eyes grew dark.

"I can't do that," she said in a low voice. "Perhaps he will come back. He can't mean to desert us! He is a gentleman."

The mother sighed.

"A gentleman! Impossible! How do you know?"

"How does one know? Oh, yes, he is! I could tell by his way of speaking, and by his face; besides, he ate his breakfast like—oh, well! like anyone else. But he is very strange. But don't be cast down, mother. He may, he *must* come back to us; and meanwhile, we ought to be thankful that we are spared. I can scarcely realise that we are not tossing about in that dreadful boat, with the waves howling to devour us, and those cruel rocks threatening to crush us. Yes, we must be thankful, mother. We are alive, and you are better—and warm, are you not? And see, I will make you some hot milk. You will be stronger presently; this air will do you good, 'tis so soft and bracing."

The woman sighed with a fretful refusal to be comforted.

"What use to live?" she said. "Better to have made an end of it out there last night. Life is over for me. And cast upon a desert island—"

"Not a desert island, mother. See, there is a hut—why, it is quite comfortable!—and enough to eat and drink! Ah! do not let us despair! Presently some ship will pass, or some civilized people will come and find us."

While she had been speaking, she had been warming some milk, of which her mother drank a small quantity, closing her eyes immediately afterwards, and either falling asleep or into a kind of stupour.

The girl stood before the fire in deep thought—deep and disturbing thought, to judge by the varied expressions which it called up on her face. At one moment her eyes shone as if with anger and resentment, the next they became dewy, as if with the unshed tears of vexation and shame. Presently she glanced down at her clothes—at the loose shirt, the nether garments. Her face burnt, and she flung up her hands before it as if to shut out the sight of the masculine garb. Then she started and looked round eagerly. Lying on the floor beside the bed was a small bundle wrapped in a covering of tarpaulin. She remembered that one of the officers of the ship had, with a man's thoughtfulness even in the hour of his death, thrown it into the boat after them, together with some biscuits and water.

She sprang to the bundle and tore it open. It contained a few articles of woman's attire—just such things as a man would snatch up from a cabin before the ship went down. She opened them, and as she unrolled a blue serge skirt a small tin box fell out. She looked at it rather indifferently. She had seen it once before, under her mother's pillow in the berth.

As she picked it up, her mother, awakened by the noise of its striking against the floor, opened her eyes and saw it.

She leant forward eagerly, almost fiercely.

"Stella! What are you doing with that? Why did you take it? Answer me! Why did you steal it?"

The voice, the tone, were in their strange eagerness so sudden a contrast to the woman's lassitude, so unexpected, that the girl stared at her, as if discovered in some underhand action.

"Mother!" she remonstrated, in wonder. "This box, do you mean? I found it here, in this bundle—"

"Give it to me—give it to me at once!" said the woman, stretching out her hand.

The girl brought it to her, and the woman clutched it, and, as if endeavouring to conceal it, covered it with both hands.

"Never take it again! It is mine—mine!" she said, swiftly, defiantly; then, as if afraid or ashamed of her vehemence, she went on, more quietly: "It belongs to me—to me alone—alone. It—it is of no consequence—only some trifles, some mementoes; but I value them. How—how did it come to be saved?"

"I found it in this bundle," replied the girl. "It must have been found under your pillow, and the first mate, thinking it of importance, put it with the other things. See, mother, here is a skirt and a blouse for you, and—I scarcely know what else; and there is this skirt of mine. I—I am glad."

She withdrew to the back of the room, and presently came back slowly to the fire, with a sigh of relief.

The mother scarcely seemed to notice the change the girl had made in her attire, but while her back had been turned, the elder woman had hidden the small tin box.

Stella made the beds and "tidied up" the hut; she was still very thoughtful; but she glanced at the short rough blue skirt again and again, and each time seemed more comforted and, so to speak, encouraged.

The mother fell into her half-sleeping state again, and Stella examined the contents of the hut; though "examined" suggests a closer inspection than she made of it, for she looked round rather shyly, feeling as a guest might do in a room in which she is waiting for the host.

She noticed the guns and knives well cleaned and glistening in the rack over the fireplace; the neat book-case, with its few books; the cupboards with bottles and phials of spirit and oil and medicines; the cooking utensils scrupulously clean; the bundles of dried herbs; the fishing-rods and tackle; the powder and cartridge boxes. A magnificent coat of sealskin which hung beside the bed proved so fascinating and irresistible that she went up to it and passed her hand over the rich, soft fur, and stroked it lovingly, as a woman would.

Then she deemed it wise to take something of a survey of the surroundings of the hut. She went to the door slowly and looked round cautiously before going out; but there was no one in sight. The young man who had rescued them, the lad with the musical name—Rath Rayne—had not returned.

The hut stood on a little clearing from which a path led to a kind of plantation. Here she found a cow-house, but the cow was out at pasture; some pigs, and some fowls. The former squeaked a welcome, and the latter ran to the netting which enclosed them, as if expecting to be fed. She got some bread from the house and shared it between pigs and fowls, then, being afraid to penetrate through the plantation, went back and to the bank overlooking the sea where she and Rath had sat, so contentedly that morning. She took the tea-things in and washed them, aired and mended the things of her mother's which she had found in the bundle—a tidy "housewife" with needles and thread hung over the fireplace—and then looked round for something else to do. It was too early to prepare dinner, which she had decided should consist of boiled eggs; and she ventured timidly to take a book from the shelves.

It was a treatise on farm work, and she noticed that the front fly leaf had been neatly and carefully removed, and that a couple of inches at the top of the title page had also been cut away; she examined the rest of the books, and found that in every case the fly leaf, upon which the name is generally written, was missing. They were nearly all books of a practical character; but there was one on heraldry, with, as in the case of the other, the blank leaf removed.

She pondered over the fact with the natural curiosity of her sex, but could make nothing of it, and had to pass her time looking at the coats of arms and the crests in the heraldry. But how slowly lagged the hours! She spun out the cooking and eating of the dinner as long as she could, but the hours that followed, though broken by the tea and supper, dragged so heavily that she found herself watching the clock and listening as if for the occurrence of some expected event.

Day glided, dragged, into night. She went to the door and looked out before she closed it, and listened. But there was no sound of footsteps; only the dull boom of the sea, the shrill of a sea-gull. If only the dog would come! But, of course, he had deserted them with his master.

They were going to spend the night alone; two helpless women, unprotected in this strange, wild place, surrounded by who knew what perils! Her eyes filled with tears, and her hand shook as she slowly shut the door, as if she were shutting Fear in instead of out.

She lay awake listening for Rath, but she fell asleep at last; and when she woke, refreshed and courageous—oh, youth! youth! sleep to you is indeed Nature's sweet restorer!—the

sun was high in the heavens. She had not undressed, and she leapt from the bed and cautiously opened the door. And her eyes fell upon a can of foaming milk, a basket of eggs, and a chicken ready dressed for cooking!

The blood rushed to her face, and she drew back for an instant; then before she stooped to take up the things, she looked round with a sudden hope springing up in her bosom, but no human being was in sight.

CHAPTER V.

SHE felt inclined to pitch the milk-can and the fowl into the bush, but very wisely resisted the temptation. It was evident that the strange being who inhabited this solitary island did not intend to starve them, and for that she supposed she must be grateful; but it must be confessed that there was not much gratitude in her bosom. She would have infinitely preferred that he should have come and apologised, and that they should have gone in search of provisions together. It was so terribly lonely! And she looked forward to another such day as that of yesterday with absolute dread. She found it impossible to remain in the hut, for the bright sunshine, the warm atmosphere, rare, though warm, seemed to woo her.

"I will go and get some flowers, mother," she said in the afternoon. "You will not mind being left? I shall not be long, and I will keep within call."

"No," replied her mother. "Why should I mind? There is nothing could happen to me that I should fear. Stella"—she paused a moment—"you will say nothing—tell no one about—about the box?"

"No, mother. But you forget that there is no one to tell, excepting a boy—young man—who carefully avoids us!" she added, a trifle bitterly.

As she went out, she drew a long breath. The place was an earthly paradise; never in all her girlish dreams had she imagined a place more beautiful. If only there were some other persons on the island, just one family!

She began to gather some of the flowers which grew in profusion beyond the sand line, and presently, as was natural, forgot her promise to remain within call, and wandered into the wood nearest the hut.

The firs were like the columns of a vast cathedral, and the moss was studded with anemones and a blue and red flower whose name she did not know; the air, too, was fragrant with

the scent of the terebene from the firs. Such a delicious air that she began to feel happy in spite of herself. Then suddenly she realized that she was wandering, and began to trace her steps; but she lost her way amongst the trees, and presently found herself in a spot quite new to her.

She had emerged from the edge of the wood, and stood on a slight elevation looking over the plain or "burrow" to the sea.

As she stood there, not knowing what to do or which way to take, she heard footsteps, and instantly she took alarm. It might be the young man Rath, or it might—well, be something in the shape of one of the wild beasts with which her imagination peopled the island.

Mechanically she threw herself down behind a bush, and waited.

The steps came nearer, and she saw Rath coming across the open space. Her heart beat fast as she watched him approach. He had a rifle over his shoulder, and was walking slowly, with his eyes cast down, as if he were deep in thought.

Girl-like, she could not help noticing the strength and grace of his supple form, the almost classic beauty of his face, and its absorbed, self-contained expression, which is only to be found on the face of the solitary.

That he should find her hiding from him, crouching as if with fear, was intolerable to her, and she rose slowly and stood erect, an exquisite picture against the background of firs.

Rath heard her, and looked up, and in an instant brought his Winchester to position, and aimed at her.

Stella went white, and she quivered like an aspen leaf; she could already feel the bullet striking her heart; but she did not scream or cry for mercy.

Slowly she stretched out her arms, and looking straight along the barrel of the rifle, said in a low voice:

"Fire; but let me speak first!"

Rath hesitated, and lowered the Winchester; but held it as if ready to shoot at any moment.

"What do you want to say?" he said, not angrily, but with the calmness of the judge demanding of the prisoner why the sentence of death should not be passed.

The girl's breath came a little more easily.

"Come up here," she said; then, as Rath hesitated, she could not withhold the taunt. "Oh, you need not be afraid, I sha'n't hurt you—though I am a girl. Besides, you can shoot me just as easily up here as down there."

This argument being quite incontrovertible, Rath, after a

moment's hesitation, ascended the rise and stood within a few yards of her, leaning on his rifle, his eyes regarding her steadfastly.

Her heart was still beating fast, but she managed to conceal her agitation, and actually looked out to sea, as if something had attracted her attention, and she had, for the moment, forgotten him; then she turned her gaze upon him, and enquired, with the calmness of the girl who addresses a man who is about the same age as herself, and therefore, of course, only a boy in her sight:

"Will you please tell me why you were going to shoot me?"

Rath did not reply. Though this was the first woman he had seen, his man's instinct told him that it was safer not to reply to some of their questions.

"Oh, I suppose because you were afraid of me. How very strange that a big bo—man like you should be afraid of a girl; and I'm not a very big one, either. But I assure you there is no need for alarm. I shall not hurt you."

A civilised being would have flushed with shame under this sweetly uttered taunt; but Rath heard it unmoved.

"I am not afraid," he said in a matter-of-fact way.

"Oh! then it is because you don't like me—my sex—and want to get rid of me," she said. "I'm very sorry to have intruded; but you'll do me the justice to admit that I'm not here by my own choice; and I assure you that I—we, my mother and I—would be as pleased to get away as you would to be rid of us. Can you help us to escape?"

Rath shook his head.

"Not yet," he said, quietly. "It is far to the town where men and women live. I do not know the way by land—you would be lost; and there is only the boat and my canoe, which would not live in the sea outside the bay. The Indians do not come again for months."

"A ship might see us and take us away?" she suggested, eagerly.

He shook his head again.

"No ships pass within sight of this part of the island."

Stella sighed, and slid slowly to the ground.

"So we must stay prisoners until when—for months? Oh, it is dreadful! dreadful for us and you, but worse for us. I think, perhaps, after all, you had better shoot us."

He looked down at her thoughtfully.

"I suppose that you would kill us quickly; we should not have much pain," she remarked.

He frowned.

"I am not going to kill you. I will do you no harm—if you will keep out of my way."

She looked up at him with innocent—or mock innocent—widely opened eyes.

"Thank you—thank you very much. I am grateful. I have also to thank you for your kindness in putting the milk and things outside the door last night."

"You must eat," said Rath.

"Yes," she admitted, repressing a smile; "but I don't like being beholden to a person who hates me so much that he wants to shoot me every time he sees me."

"Why did you deceive me?" he said, rather sternly. "You pretended to be a boy."

"I didn't!" she retorted, indignantly; then she blushed furiously. "Oh! you mean because I was dressed like one. It was not my fault. I was asleep when the ship was sinking, and I took the first clothes the man flung to us. I didn't suppose you would take me for a boy, that it was necessary to inform you that I wasn't. Yesterday you refused to tell me why you disliked women and feared them. Won't you tell me now?"

"They are dangerous things," he said. "I promised my father—"

He stopped, and she regarded him with keen interest and curiosity.

"I never heard such—nonsense!" she said, in girlish fashion. "It is very evident that you have not met many—"

"You are the first I have seen," he said, calmly.

It was so amazing that she had to reflect over it; then she said:

"Won't you sit down, and put that ugly gun aside?"

"It isn't ugly; it is a very good Winchester," he remarked; but he laid it on the grass and sat down, but not too near her.

"Is it loaded still?" she asked; and as he replied in the affirmative, she took it up gingerly, but raised it to her shoulder and pointed it at him.

"Now, why shouldn't I kill you?" she demanded, her eyes dancing with girlish fun and triumph. "Why shouldn't I kill you, and take the island? It is yours, you say. It would be only fair."

He did not move a muscle, but looked her straight in the eyes.

"Yes, it would be only fair," he said, with perfect calm.

She lowered the rifle and held it out to him, with a feminine little shudder.

"Put the thing behind you, where I can't see it," she said.

He obeyed her, with a touch of colour in his face; for, despite his calm, he had, in his ignorance of woman's pleasing little ways, fully expected her to fire.

"Now, if I owe my life to you, you owe yours to me, and we are quits. But it isn't very pleasant to be threatened, is it?"

He did not reply, and she sat for a moment in silence; then he said:

"Is there anything you want? Now you are here, and must stay here—"

"You don't want us to starve," she finished. "It is very good of you. Is there anything I want!" She sighed. "Oh, plenty of things! I want my trunk that went down with the ship"—she glanced ruefully at her one skirt—"and I want medicine for my mother, and a piano, and a brush and comb and back-hair glass— Oh, what is the use of telling you what I want?"

"There is a brush and comb in the small cupboard—" he began; but she interrupted him.

"But what I want most is to get away from this place."

As he had already informed her that he could not help her in this, he did not deem any further assurance necessary, but sat regarding her for a moment in silence; then he said:

"What is your name?—what are you called?"

"My name is Stella—Stella Mordaunt," she replied. "Do you like it?" she demanded, dryly.

"I don't know," he said, gravely.

"Well, it can't be helped if you don't."

"How did you come here?" he asked, presently, and reluctantly, as if he were fighting against his curiosity.

"In a boat," she retorted; then, as if relenting, she went on: "That's a long story."

"Where do you come from—an island, like this, or a town?" he enquired.

"From an island—England; and from a town—London. I suppose you have heard of it?"

He nodded.

"Yes; I know there is such a place. I have heard my father speak of it."

She stared at him. That a man who spoke as he did, like a gentleman, should know no more than this was little short of incredible.

"Where is your father?" he asked.

"My father is dead, I think."

She added the last words pensively, doubtfully.

It was Rath's turn to look surprised.

"Don't you know?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"I can just remember him; a tall man, with a pale, stern face—like yours when you stood down there just now with the gun raised. We were living then in the country; I can only just remember that, too. It was at a big house, with great rooms and a big garden. I can remember the terrace where I used to play; there were two huge stone lions with snarling faces—they used to frighten me when I was a very small child—that crouched at the side of the stone steps. And there was an old gardener who used to pick flowers for me; he was very kind. Then we left the big house, mother and I, and went to live in a street in London. It was a quiet street, out of the crowd and noise, but it seemed dreadfully narrow and poor and miserable after the big house with the large gardens and green fields."

"Why did you go?" Rath asked.

Unconsciously, he drew a little nearer to her, and stretched himself at full length, leaning his head on his hand, his dark, earnest eyes fixed on her face.

"I don't know," replied the girl. She was almost speaking to herself, or as one might speak who was talking to some one who would not fully understand, so that it did not matter very much if she were too confidential. After the loneliness, the mere act of talking was grateful and pleasant. "My mother cried when we left the big house, and, of course, I cried, too; and my mother was ill and unhappy—always unhappy."

"Why did you leave the town, the big city, and come to sea?" he asked, presently.

"My mother got worse, and the doctor said she would die if she remained in England. It is nearly always cold and wet and damp there, and in London—the big city—there are fogs that stifle you."

"Then why does any one live there?" he exclaimed, wonderingly; "why not come to an island like this?"

She looked at him, as if any attempt at explanation would be hopeless.

"So we had to come abroad. I was glad to leave London, but sorry to leave England. Ah! you don't understand!" Her voice fell. "But my mother did not care; she was, she is, too ill to care for anything. Oh! I have forgotten her! Is it far from the hut?"

She sprang to her feet.

"No; it is just round the bend. You can almost see it; you can hear if any one calls."

She hesitated a moment, then sank down again, and Carl snuggled up beside her and stretched his paws on her dress, and rested his head on them, and gazed from one to the other, no doubt rather relieved to find that the shooting was over for the present. Stella stroked his rough head as she went on:

"Then the vessel sprang a leak—is that right? I think it struck a rock first and went down, and the rest you know."

"What became of the rest of the people on the big ship?" Rath asked.

Stella shook her head sadly.

"I don't know. There were not many boats; it was not a regular passenger ship. I heard one of the men say that nothing could live in such a storm, and I suppose it was only by a miracle that we escaped. Perhaps we were the only two."

"It is very likely," he assented, calmly; he had witnessed the fury of the waves too often to be smitten with the awe which one unaccustomed to the sea would have felt at this reflection. "So that your friends will not search for you? They will think you are lost."

"We have no friends," said the girl. "It will not matter to anyone if we are dead or alive—except to you, who, of course, must wish that we were dead."

"No," he said, judicially; "I do not wish that, though I am sorry you came here."

The girl bit her lip.

"It is a pity I am not a boy," she said, ironically.

"It is," he assented, with something like a sigh. "I should like you, if you were not—yes, there is something about you I like; you have a pleasant face—different to the Indians; and your voice— Are all women's faces and voices like yours?"

The girl stared at him.

"Oh, no," she said, simply. "They are much better, prettier, and sweeter."

"Are they?" he said, reflectingly. "I wonder why they are so wicked, so dangerous?"

Stella shook her head.

"They are not all," she said.

There was silence for a moment, then she turned to him, as if suddenly smitten bv an idea.

"Why can't we pretend that I am a boy?" she said, with suppressed eagerness.

He looked at her gravely, and pondered the idea.

"It would make things pleasanter for all of us," she went on, persuasively. "You need not run away from me then, or want to shoot me, and make me want to run away from you. It is so dreadfully lonely in this place"—her eyes filled with tears, but she checked them proudly—"and—and one is so helpless; besides, it is so hard to have to depend upon a man—a person—who dislikes you and wants to get rid of you."

He nodded and waited, and she continued, still more persuasively:

"While we are obliged to be here—how long did you say it would be? Oh, dear!—let us forget that I am a girl. I could help you. I can cook and wash up, and mend clothes, and, oh! I could learn to do all sorts of things!"

Her innocent eyes shone like stars in her eagerness.

"It's better than living apart on this desert island—better than living like a cat and dog. I'll promise never to remind you that I'm a girl. And you could always shoot me if I—what was it you said?—proved dangerous."

"That is true," he said; but he seemed to hesitate. His father's warning rang in his ears, but it rang dully, like a warning spoken from afair, from a rapidly increasing distance, like a voice in a mist.

"You shall call me by a boy's name, if you like. I don't care."

"No; I like 'Stella,'" he said, thoughtfully; "and I don't know the difference."

"Then you agree!" she said, with a smile that dazzled him and made him blink suddenly. "Then it's a bargain!" she said. "We're—what do you call it?—'mates' from this moment! And you won't run away—desert us—again?"

He frowned thoughtfully.

"I can't come to the hut; you shall live there," he said. "I can build a hut in the wood."

"Well, as you like! But you'll let me help you? You'll teach me to help you with your work? Girls—I mean boys; I was forgetting—can learn to fish and hunt things; and, at any rate, we shall be company. Let us shake hands on it! It is what men do, isn't it?"

She held out her hand with a bewitching smile.

"I don't know," he said; but he took her hand, and as his strong fingers closed over it he felt a strange thrill, mysteri-

ous but pleasant, run up his arm. It was strange; for the pressure of her small hand was surely too slight to cause such a feeling.

She laughed as she drew her hand away, and the laugh rang like music on the clear air. Then she sprang to her feet.

"I must go to my mother! Meet me here in—yes, an hour."

She ran down the slope and disappeared round the bend which led to the hut. And Rath rose and looked after her with a strange, a puzzled expression on his face. His father's warning words again rang in his ears, but still more faintly and indistinctly, for the voice, the laugh of the girl joined with and deadened them.

* * * * * * *

Some days later the London newspapers reported the wreck of the "Andromeda," which had gone down in mid-ocean with all on board, and in the list of the lost were the names of Mrs. Mordaunt and her daughter. So that the two women who had drifted to Refuge Island were, to all intents and purposes, dead to the world! A fact big with consequences.

CHAPTER VI.

On the afternoon Stella and Rath came to an agreement in the Isle of Refuge, two gentlemen were walking up the avenue to Ratton Hall.

It is a famous avenue, and its lines of tall elms, whose overlapping boughs form a perfect arch of green leaves, have been photographed and described so often that the avenue is as well known as, say, the chestnuts of Bushey Park or the beeches of Burnham.

But the gentlemen were so engrossed in conversation that they took no heed of the magnificent trees or the view of the great house which presently disclosed itself at the end of the avenue. One gentleman was Mr. Bulpit, the lawyer to the estate; the other was Mr. Greyfold, the steward; and they were discussing with intense gravity and suppressed excitement the question as to whom the great house before them and the thousands of acres around them belonged. For, little more than a month ago, its late master, the Earl of Ratton, had been found dead in his arm-chair in the library, and since then the vast place had been masterless and the title without an avowed owner.

As the lawyer and the steward mounted the side steps

which led to the terrace running along the whole length of the front of the building, the steward, though he had seen it every day since he was a boy, stood and looked round, and shook his head solemnly.

"It's the most extraordinary case!" he said, under his breath. "The most wonderful romance of the peerage!"

Mr. Bulpit coughed rather irritably.

"Oh! there have been many 'romances of the peerage' more wonderful than this," he said, as if he resented the phrase as too sensational and savouring of melodrama. "In short, there is not much 'romance' about it. The fact that we can't find an heir to the place and title is a very practical one."

"Of course there must be an heir?" said Mr. Greyfold, questioningly.

"Not necessarily," replied Mr. Bulpit. "Not a direct heir, lineally descended. It would not be the first time an old and historic title has become extinct. Of course, there will be found some remote next of kin to take the land and the money; but that's a very different thing to finding an heir to the title and—and the glory of the old house."

He used the word "glory" grudgingly, as if, lawyer-like, he were reluctant to yield to the influence of sentiment; but the steward sighed with open and emphatic melancholy.

"I suppose it will get into Chancery," he said, regretfully.

Mr. Bulpit pursed his lips and nodded.

"I am afraid so," he said.

"And we know what that means," remarked the steward, with another sigh. "The land will be neglected—the whole place go to ruin. Chancery! That's the very worst that can happen."

The lawyer nodded again.

"We'd better go in," he said, turning towards the great hall door at which a butler had been standing for some minutes ready to receive them.

Just as they were entering, a lady and gentleman rode up the avenue; and the steward and the lawyer paused and turned again.

"It's Lord Hatherley and his daughter, Lady Mary," said the steward in an under-tone; and he went down to meet the two riders as they pulled up at the bottom of the steps.

"Oh, good-morning, Mr. Greyfold," said Lord Hatherley, touching his hat in response to the respectful raising of the steward's. "We saw you and Mr. Bulpit turn in at the

gate, and rode after you to ask if you had heard anything, if you have any news. How are you, Mr. Bulpit?"

His lordship was a middle-aged man, with a face made pleasant by kindly looking eyes and a good-tempered smile.

Lady Mary, who rode beside him, his only daughter, was a charming specimen of the young English girl, with deep brown eyes—like her father's—and soft brown hair which shimmered in the sunlight. The beauty of her face, almost faultless in its contour and features, was increased by the sweetness of her smile, which not only gave a delicious curve to the lips, but shone in the frank, grave eyes.

"This is my daughter, Mr. Bulpit—just back from her school on the Continent—you remember Mr. Bulpit and Mr. Greyfold, Mary?" he added in the friendly, genial fashion which made the Hatherleys loved by all who knew them.

Lady Mary bowed to both, and smiled.

"Why, of course, father! As if I should have forgotten!"

The steward and the lawyer drew nearer, as if magnetised by her sweet young presence, and the steward, in a respectful way, stroked the neck of her well-nigh thorough-bred.

"We are all glad to see you back, Lady Mary," he said; "and none more glad, I'll make bold to say, than his lordship."

"You are right, Greyfold!" assented Lord Hatherley, casting a proud and loving glance at his beautiful daughter. "I couldn't say how much I've missed her, if I tried! And is there any news?"

Mr. Bulpit shook his head.

"No, my lord," he said, gravely. "We have not found the missing heir yet."

Lord Hatherley murmured a "Tut, tut!" of surprise and sympathy.

"What will you do?" he asked.

"Continue the search, by private enquiry and advertisement," said the lawyer.

Lord Hatherley nodded.

"You will let me know directly you hear anything?" he asked. "As a near neighbour and friend of poor Lord Ratton—"

"Certainly, my lord," said Mr. Bulpit. "You shall be the first to hear it if Ralph Percival turns up."

Lord Hatherley looked along the length of the house and round about him at the perfectly trimmed lawns and orderly flower-beds.

"You keep everything up, Mr. Greyfold," he remarked.

"Oh, yes, my lord. You see, we don't know how soon the new master may present himself. Mr. Bulpit and I are just going over the house to see that everything is in order. Will you and Lady Mary come in, my lord?"

Lord Hatherley declined, and he and Lady Mary rode away.

"How strange it seems, father, that they should not know to whom Ratton Hall and the title belong! How is it? I don't understand!"

Lord Hatherley was silent for a minute or two, looking thoughtfully between his horse's ears; then he said:

"Yes, it is strange enough, Mary. I was just wondering whether I should tell you the story or not; but you would be bound to hear it, and presently, when the newspapers get hold of it, all England will be talking about it; and so I may as well tell you. Of course you remember Lord Ratton, who is just dead?"

"Y-es—that is, I don't remember him very distinctly. I don't think I saw him more than twice or thrice, did I?"

"Very likely not. No, I daresay not; in fact, few of us saw him very often."

"I've a faint recollection of a tall, thin man with a haggard face and very dark and piercing eyes. Is that right?"

Lord Hatherley nodded.

"Yes, that describes Lord Ratton very fairly," he assented. "And that you saw him so seldom, though we live so near, is not surprising, considering that he lived the life of a recluse, and seldom passed beyond the bounds of the grounds. Indeed, most of the time he shut himself up in his own room and the library, which is one of the finest in the kingdom."

"Why did he live such a life? Was he quite alone?" asked Lady Mary.

"Yes, quite alone, and the why and wherefore is the story. See here, Mary, we'll talk of this this morning and then cut it, for it's not a pleasant kind of topic."

"Don't tell me, father; I'm not curious," she said, sweetly.

"Yes, you've got to hear it from someone," he said. "Here it is, then: There were three brothers, Tudor Percival, Harold Percival, and Ralph Percival. The Lord Ratton who has just died was the eldest. Just before he succeeded to the title, there came on a visit to the Grange—the Donneshornes' place, you know—a young girl, who was so beautiful, so altogether charming, that nearly all the young men in the place were fascinated. Among others, the two brothers, Tudor and Harold, fell in love with her. They were both in-

fatuated enough, but Tudor Percival was madly in love; so madly that perhaps he frightened her, for she accepted the second brother, Harold."

"Poor Lord Ratton! No wonder he looked so unhappy and shut himself up."

Lord Hatherley shook his head.

"No, that didn't account for it. Don't think me ungallant, Mary, if I say that a man's love-disappointment does not last his life. Time heals that as it heals more serious wounds. It was not the fact that the woman he loved had preferred his brother that cast a gloom over Lord Ratton's life which nothing and no one had power to enlighten, but remorse."

"Remorse, father?"

"Yes," said Lord Hatherley, gravely. "For when Lord Ratton heard that his brother had married the girl they both loved, Lord Ratton swore an awful oath that he would rob him of her."

"Father!" Mary's eyes opened, and her face grew pale. "How awful!"

Lord Hatherley nodded.

"And he kept his oath. By what means, by what persistent efforts he gained an influence over her, I do not know. They say a great many things of the Rattons, and amongst them that no woman is able to resist them when they put forth all their strength to woo her. Be that as it may, Lord Ratton succeeded in persuading his brother's wife to run away with him; but though she left her husband, Fate stepped in and prevented the crime to which she had been lured; for an hour before that in which Lord Ratton had appointed to meet her, she was killed. The horses in the carriage which was taking her to him took fright and bolted. Lord Ratton was the first to disentangle her dead body from the débris."

"Oh, father! how terrible! And her poor husband?"

"They carried her to the Hall here, and a few hours afterwards Lord Ratton's brother followed her. He had their only child—a boy—in his arms, and he and Lord Ratton met in the hall beside the dead body of the woman, and the half-maddened husband cursed his brother and departed with the child."

Lady Mary was silent a moment; then she said:

"But, father, then this brother, or his child, must be the heir, now that Lord Ratton is dead!"

"Neither of them is alive," said Lord Hatherley. "Har-

old left England with his little boy, and the ship in which they sailed went down."

"And they were lost? Father, it is like a romance! Oh, poor man!"

"I don't know. One feels inclined to say that it was the best thing that could happen to him. But it's sad enough in all conscience. One hears of certain families which rest under a ban, and they say that the Rattons is one of them. From the hour his brother's curse fell on him, they say Lord Ratton never knew a happy moment. No one ever heard him utter a kind word nor ever saw him smile; and they tell me that when they found him the other day in his arm-chair, there was a scowl of hate on his dead face. Remorse isn't penitence, alas! Molly; and we find it hard not to hate those we have injured."

"But, father, there was a third brother—what was his name?—Ralph. Why does he not come forward and claim the title and estates?"

"Ah! that's the question!" replied Lord Hatherley. "The fact is, the third brother has been lost for years. He was a bad lot, a very, very black sheep, and the family had to cut him adrift. He went abroad to Australia, I believe; but he came back, and, I've heard, brought a wife with him. They remained in England, living more or less disreputably for some time, then they disappeared. At last he died; but it was rumoured that he had left a son behind him, though whether there was any truth in the rumour, I can't say."

"And if he left a son, then that son would be the new Lord Ratton?" said Mary.

"That is so," assented her father. "But the difficulty will be to find that son—supposing him to exist. His father lived for years under an assumed name—he had done one or two things which rendered it necessary for him to sink the family name of Percival—and probably the son—supposing him to exist—never knew his real name."

"But his father would know that he, or his son, was heir to the title."

"The father, who married very early, died before the second brother was drowned, and, seeing that brother had already a son, would not think that he himself had much chance of succeeding."

"I see," said Lady Mary, thoughtfully. "Then somewhere, perhaps in poverty and destitution, there exists a young man who is really the Earl of Ratton, and the heir to all the Ratton property?"

"Exactly," assented Lord Hatherley.

"How strange!" she mused. "Father, if they found him, it is to be hoped he will be nice. He will be our nearest neighbour, you see."

Hatherley looked grave.

"It is devoutly to be hoped that he will," he said. "But—ah, well—one is rather doubtful. It is difficult to be hopeful about a son of Ralph Percival—I remember Ralph. An awful blackguard, poor fellow! One mustn't expect grapes from thorns, Mary. But seeing that he hasn't turned up, we'll discontinue the subject, and—yes, try and forget it," he added, as they turned into their own park gates. "I'm hungry, and want my dinner—and, oh, Molly, Molly! if you knew how much more I enjoy it now that you have come to sit at the head of the table!"

CHAPTER VII.

A FORTNIGHT later a young man paused outside the door of the Columbine public-house in Drury Lane, and with one hand on the edge of the door and the other fingering a solitary copper, looked thirstily into the bar. One of the beautiful, drizzling rains for which England is justly infamous was making Drury Lane more hideous even than its wont, and the young man, as he stood like a Peri outside the gates of Paradise, scowled up at the leaden sky, and turned up the collar of his seedy coat.

"One penny left; gin or beer?" he muttered. "I'll toss for it." He spun the solitary copper, muttering, "Heads, gin; tails, beer;" and, chance having decided the momentous question, opened the door just sufficiently wide for him to slip in, went up to the counter, and, with a half-friendly, half-insolent nod to the barmaid, asked for the gin.

"There you are, Mr. Bannister. And how are *you* to-night?" she asked, pleasantly, as she served him the fiery liquid, and swabbed the pewter counter with a cloth as damp as the evening. "'Eard of anything yet?"

The young man drank half his gin, and looked lovingly at the remainder as he shook his head. He was a tall young fellow, with dark hair and rather fine eyes—not a bad-looking man by any means—but there was something in the expression of the face, a certain half-cunning, half-defiant gleam in the eyes, a hint of meanness in the mouth, fortunately nearly hidden by the moustache, which one could not fail to notice, especially when the face was in repose, and which impressed

one unfavourably. Though he wore a moustache, the face wore the unmistakable appearance of the actor's; the hair had been shaved from the front of the temples, so that it should not protrude from the wig, and there was that blueness about the chin and coarseness of the complexion which the grease paint and powder used in "making-up" invariably cause. In fact, the Columbine is the "house of call" for third- and fourth- and even fifth-rate actors; and it was to the fifth, if not to the sixth rank, that the young man lounging against the damp and sticky counter belonged; but the profession could not claim him entirely, for he was a sporting "tout" as well as an actor, and now and again did a little "on the pavement," which, being interpreted, means singing in the street outside, or, if the landlord be friendly, inside the bar of the public-houses.

For all his good looks and rather gentlemanly appearance, the young fellow was a black sheep, and like most black sheep, he was now and again painfully and sullenly aware of his colour, especially when he was "down on his luck." And he was very much down on his luck that evening, for he had spent his last penny, and only half of his purchase remained to him.

"No, I've not heard of anything," he said, replying to the question which the young lady behind the bar found beautifully appropriate to nearly every customer; for it was to the Columbine that the actor "out of a shop" generally came. When he was engaged he patronised a higher class and more aristocratic bar—the Gaiety or the Criterion. "And I'm not likely to," he added, sullenly.

He looked up at the rain-bespattered windows; then, with a sigh, felt in the breast-pocket of his coat, and drew out a battered and spineless cigarette. It required careful manipulation, but he succeeded in lighting it at last; and seating himself on the form under the window, smoked with the morose air of one who has a grudge against Fate and can't see any way of paying it off.

Every now and then he glanced at the clock—there was no watch at the end of the brass chain which stretched in approved fashion across his greasy waistcoat—and presently, as the hands got round to half past seven, he rose and began to button his coat across his chest. As he did so, the swing door was flung open and a couple of men came in.

One of them—a gentleman with hair of the peculiar jet which indicates dye, a close-shaven face, and a hat worn rak-

ishly on one side—nodded to the young fellow and greeted him.

"What ho! Bannie, my boy! How goes it?"

The young man nodded, made a suitable response, and was passing out, when the dyed one caught him by the arm.

"What's your hurry?" he demanded. "Stop and have a drink. Here, let me introduce you to a pal of mine, Mr. Workley. Workley, this is a brother pro."

The man addressed was a small, short, under-sized old man, with a face wrinkled with lines like a railway map, a long mouth, with thin lips tightly compressed, and small grey eyes, which glittered like a bird's under half-lowered lids. He, too, was clean shaven, but looked like a groom or a horse-dealer rather than an actor.

The young fellow turned, and the little man, looking him full in the face, started. It was only a slight start, and he tried to nullify it and efface it by pretending to slip on a piece of orange peel.

"Nearly down," he said in a thin and peculiarly hollow voice. "Glad to know you, Mr.—what name did you say?" he broke off in an ordinary tone; but his sharp eyes rested like polished steel on the other man's dark ones.

"Bannister's my name," said the young man, curtly.

"Ah! fancy I've heard it before," said Mr. Workley. "No, it's my treat, Jim. Name your poison, gentlemen! And I fancy I've met *you* before, sir."

"You have the advantage of me," said Bannister, indifferently.

"Yes? Then you remind me of someone I've met," rejoined the other, pleasantly.

"My friend Workley's a great traveller," said the third man to Bannister. "He's been about a bit, and seen a few, haven't you, my boy?"

The little man nodded.

"Yes; and you're an actor, Mr. Bannister?"

"N-o; I've cut the stage," said Bannister, with as high an air as he could assume.

"Does a bit of book-making and touting," explained Jim, adding the last two words in a whisper.

The little man nodded, and turned his attention to the liquor. Bannister disposed of his, and glanced at the clock.

"So long!" he said. "I must be off."

"Good-night, and luck to you, my boy!" responded the actor.

The little man nodded, then suddenly turned to Bannister.

"I've remembered," he said, fixing his eyes upon him. "You're right; I've not met you before; but you remind me of a man, a pal of mine, who's gone under years ago. His name was Percival. Ever heard it?"

The young man's face flushed, but so slightly that the actor did not notice it; but Workley did, though his eyes made no sign.

"No," said Bannister; and he went out.

"Seems offended," remarked Jim. "What sort of a chap was the man he reminded you of?"

The little man shrugged his shoulders.

"About as hot a member as they make 'em," he replied. "This chap that's gone out is the image of him—got the same look in his eyes, and the same nasty twist at the corners of his mouth. Do you know anything about him? Where does he live, for instance?"

The actor shook his head indifferently.

"Don't know. Know nothing about him, exceping just meeting him at a pub. now and again—generally here. Let's have another drink."

The young man went down Drury Lane into the Strand, and across Waterloo Bridge, frowning thoughtfully, and gnawing at the lip which, as Workley put it, "had the nasty twist" to it; for the little man had mentioned the young fellow's real name, and he knew that Workley had referred to his father. Of that father the son knew very little, and that little was of a kind which had prompted him to disown his parent and deny his own name.

Crossing Waterloo Bridge, he turned down one of the squalid and miserable streets on the right, and, opening a door of one of the dirty houses, he went up two flights of stairs, and into a small and poverty-stricken room.

A woman was bending over the fire, cooking a herring in a frying-pan; and the ill odor of the fish, mingled with the evil scent of the cheap lamp, filled the room with an atmosphere too thick and powerful for adequate description.

As he entered, the woman looked round. She was not very much more than a girl, and, seen in a more favourable light, would have been good-looking; and, indeed, even in the dismal gloom of the smoky lamp one could see that, with proper food and gentler circumstances, she would have developed into a beautiful woman. She was dark, and her large eyes, almost black, shone with a feverish lustre from the colourless face. Her lips, well formed, drooped at the corners, and the straight brows were joined with an anxious, care-worn expres-

sion. But her voice was cheerful and affectionate as she turned and looked at him with a fond smile, which, brief as it was, had tenderness enough in it to transform the expression of the face from one of suffering and want to one of gentle welcome.

"Oh, you've come at last, Ralph! I've just cooked you—"

"Phew!" he said, coldly, and with an air of disgust. "If that's for me, take it off the fire and pitch it out of the window if you like. I don't want it; the smell's enough for me. Put it away somewhere, or I'll go out again."

She took the pan from the fire and carried it outside the door, and opened the window.

"I'm sorry, dear," she said, apologetically; "but—but there was only enough for a herring—"

"I thought you went for your money this afternoon," he cut in, with an air of disappointment and anger. "You don't mean to say they didn't pay you?"

"Oh, yes, they did, dear," she made haste to reply; "but there was two weeks' rent—"

"Which you could have left," he said.

"They wouldn't wait, Ralph; they wouldn't, indeed! She told me so to-day. And I had to buy some oil, and I bought the tobacco for you. Then there was only enough for a loaf of bread and some butter."

"Oh, for God's sake, spare me the details!" he said, curtly. "I come home—perhaps missing a good thing—thinking you'd have a shilling or two."

"I'm sorry, Ralph!" she said, going up to him and putting her arm round his shoulder. "And you're wet! Take off your coat and let me dry it."

"Oh, don't bother!" he said; but he sullenly permitted her to take the coat off. "Did they promise you a rise?" he asked, after a pause, during which he filled his pipe from the packet of expensive tobacco which she had laid on the table beside him.

She shook her head.

"No, dear; and I didn't like to press it. You see, there's plenty hungering after my place in the ballet, poor as it is. Oh, there's hundreds that would be glad to snatch at it! But I've been to Mr. Abraham's, the agent's, again this afternoon, and he said that he thought he might get me something at the Halls; anyway, that he'd be sure to remember me."

"Yes; we know what that means!" he said, with a sullen sneer. "*Look at me!* I tell you what it is, Nita, I don't

think I can stand this much longer. The life's pulling me down. I shall cut it. Don't be surprised if you find, some fine day, that I've gone off to—to Klondike, or somewhere."

Her face, already of an ivory pallor, went whiter, and she stopped in the act of putting on her shawl and hat, and looked at him, holding her breath, as it were.

"You—you wouldn't do that! No; you couldn't be so heartless!" she panted. Then she forced a smile, and bent over him. "I've been a good wife to you, Ralph."

He made a movement of impatience; and—how soon a wife learns to check all signs of unwelcome affection!—she drew away from him.

"I must go. If I can borrow a shilling, I'll bring something home for supper. Don't put your coat on again till it's dry."

She went out, and the man, when her footsteps had disappeared, brought in the herring and ate it. Then he lit his pipe again, yawned, and catching sight of the piece of newspaper in which the fish had been wrapped, took it up and began to read it.

Suddenly his hands clutched at the paper, his face flamed red, his eyes grew wide, and an exclamation broke from him. For this is what he read:

"THE RATTON ROMANCE.—Notwithstanding the unceasing efforts of the family solicitor, Mr. Bulpit, of Market Ratton, the heir to the title and vast estates of Ratton has not yet been discovered. The heir—indeed, the owner, for there now stands no one between him and the historic earldom and almost uncountable wealth of Ratton—is a son of the third brother, Ralph Percival. It is known that Ralph, the father, was—well, anything but a respectable man, and that, for reasons easily understood, he found it wise to conceal his name. He was in Australia, where he married, and Mr. Bulpit is assured that a son was born. This son, if he is alive, is the Earl of Ratton. The latest tidings of the father leave him playing small parts in a country theatre. Perhaps the son may be found following in his father's footsteps."

The young fellow stared at the paragraph as if he were in a dream; but his mind was awake. He could remember his father, raffish, disreputable, stumbling half drunk across the stage of a country theatre, and remember the swagger with which, when quite drunk, he would boast that he was "a gentleman, sir—a gentleman born and bred!" Could remember other such incidents, seemingly insignificant at the

time, but, heaven and earth! how significant! how pregnant with meaning now, when viewed in the light of this dazzling, electrifying paragraph!

He felt dizzy, overwhelmed, and he gazed round the room like a man half stupefied. Then suddenly he began to realise what it all meant.

His father's name was Ralph Percival—though he lived under an *alias*—*his* own name was Ralph Percival. He was the Earl of Ratton!

He fell into the chair, and instinctively looked round for something to drink. There was nothing.

"An earl—an earl! untold gold, and not a drop of anything! And in this filthy den!" He laughed harshly, thickly, with bitter scorn of his circumstances. "An earl! My God! I shall go mad! Uncountable wealth! And it's waiting for me! I'm a gentleman—no, a *nobleman!*—and I live, here, in *this!*"

He looked round and struck the table furiously; and then he caught sight of a skirt—a mud-stained skirt—hanging on a chair, and a strange look came into his face—a look of disgust, which slowly gave place to one of cunning; the nasty twist of the under lip again came out.

"I've been a fool!" he muttered—"a cursed fool to marry. A pretty fool I shall look with a woman—a low-class woman—hanging at my heels when I go to claim my rights. 'A ballet-girl countess!' That's what the d——d papers will call her. And it will stick to her, and to us, for life. I couldn't face it. I'd rather stop where I am, what I am!"

He leant his chin on his hands and gnawed at his lip, his eyes half hidden under his lids. And he did not look pretty at that moment, or very much like an earl.

"Why shouldn't I?" he muttered, as if he had been examining an idea. "Who'd know? She wouldn't. She never sees a paper, and the true story of my life wouldn't get into it. Why shouldn't I make a clean cut of it? By the Lord, I did give a hint just now! That's lucky. Yes, luck's turned for me, even in small ways! An earl—an earl! If I only had a drink! My head's swimming! A ballet-girl countess! No, no; it wouldn't do! She wouldn't like it—she wouldn't be happy. Yes; it would be kinder to make a clean cut of it, and—and I'll do it—I'll do it for her sake. D—n it! I didn't know who and what I was when I married her, and it wouldn't be fair to shove her into such a place—it wouldn't be fair to her. No; I'm doing the right thing,

She'll soon get over it. Women soon forget. There's plenty of other fellows, and Nita's a stylish-looking girl."

The meanness grew more distinct and hideous on his face, his eyes more shifty, as if he were afraid lest he should catch sight of his own face in the broken glass on the wall. He got a sheet of paper and wrote hastily, with a hand—in justice to him let it be said—that shook a little.

"DEAR NITA,—I find I can't stand this life any longer. I'm off to Klondike, or abroad somewhere where there's an opening. A pal has promised to help me with a passage, and I'm going to start early to-morrow. Don't fret about it. I'll come back when I've made my pile. With love,

"Yours, RALPH."

He stuck this up against the lamp on the grimy mantelshelf, put on his coat and seedy hat, and stole, like a thief, down the dirty, rickety stairs, and into the night.

* * * * * * *

The next day a tall young man entered Mr. Bulpit's office at Market Ratton, and enquired for that gentleman.

The clerk eyed him curiously and a little suspiciously; for, in the first place, the young man was a stranger, and, in the next, he was pale-faced and shabbily dressed and mud-bespattered, as if he had walked many miles, which he had.

"What name?" asked the clerk, civilly enough, but coldly.

"My name doesn't matter," replied Ralph, in a voice hoarse with fatigue and suppressed excitement.

"Mr. Bulpit is out."

Ralph leant against the table, and wiped his face with a grimy handkerchief.

"Where is he? I must see him at once. It's—it's business of the utmost importance. D—n you! What are you staring at? Here, give me a drink!"

He looked as if he were going to faint or to have a fit; and the clerk, though extremely indignant, got him a glass of water.

Ralph gulped it down and drew a long breath.

"Now, then, where is he?" he demanded, fiercely.

"Mr. Bulpit is at Ratton Hall," said the clerk, reluctantly. "He will be back in an hour or two, if you like to look in again."

But Ralph, with a malignant glance at the old clerk's astonished face, stalked out.

The Hall was rather more than two miles from the town, and Ralph never knew how he got over the ground; but pres-

ently he staggered up the avenue, and lifted his bloodshot eyes to the great house which shone whitely in the sunlight.

"My house!" he gasped. "My house, by God!"

The butler met him at the door, and would have prevented him entering, at any rate, until some enquiry had been made; but Ralph pushed past him, heard voices in the library, and, followed by a servant, entered the room.

Bulpit and Greyfold were seated at a table, paper and books before them, and they stared at the white-faced young man, who stood moistening his parched lips, as if he were trying to speak and could not.

At last he said, hoarsely:

"I am Ralph Percival, the man you are looking for!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE lawyer and the steward stared speechlessly at the young man with the white face and dust-stained clothes, as he stood gripping the edge of the table as if to steady himself.

They were too astonished to utter a word for nearly a minute; then Mr. Bulpit rose, his sharp old eyes scanning the face and figure of the claimant. He had known two generations of Percivals, and was struck by the man's likeness to the late and the former Lord Ratton.

Without a word he went and closed the door, then he pointed to a chair.

"Won't you sit down?" he said. "You look tired."

The old lawyer's calmness and dignity calmed Ralph, and he sank into the chair and wiped his face, keeping his eyes fixed on the lawyer.

"I *am* tired," he said. "I have walked from London. Which of you is Mr. Bulpit, the lawyer?"

"I am," said that gentleman, quietly. "This is Mr. Greyfold, the steward."

"Well, I tell you that I am Ralph Percival—"

Mr. Bulpit stopped him with a gesture.

"Let me offer you a glass of wine," he said.

He did not ring for a servant, but got the wine himself, and Ralph took the glass with a shaky hand and drank the contents at a draught. Then, and not till then, Mr. Bulpit rang the bell.

"I think you had better have some refreshment before—you say anything more," he said as composedly and gravely as before. "Meanwhile, you would like to wash your hands."

He ordered some lunch to be laid in the dining-room, and sent Ralph upstairs to one of the bedrooms with a servant.

Mr. Greyfold gazed at the lawyer enquiringly, and asked, breathlessly, as Ralph left the room:

"What do you think? Is it—"

Mr. Bulpit pursed his lips.

"Can't say yet; but it's not impossible—or improbable. Did you notice his resemblance to the late earl, and to some of the family portraits in the gallery?"

Mr. Greyfold nodded.

"I didn't; I've been too much bewildered by the—the suddenness of the thing; but now you mention it—yes, there is a likeness. He is not bad-looking—and yet there is something about him—"

"He has evidently had a rough time of it," said Mr. Bulpit. "Did you notice his voice? That was Ratton, too, though he was hoarse with excitement and fatigue. Yes, he may be the missing heir; at any rate, he is not a wilful impostor. He thinks himself to be the man, depend upon it."

"Why?" asked the less astute steward.

Mr. Bulpit smiled gravely.

"An impostor would have been careful to make a better appearance and create a good impression; this man is so convinced of his right to the title that he has taken no trouble whatever about appearances. Hush! here he comes."

Ralph came down the stairs slowly. He was still shaky for want of food and rest, though the glass of sherry had dispelled the feeling of actual exhaustion, and his excitement was wearing down under the weight of the magnificence of the place, the great hall, the wide and noble staircase, the luxurious room into which he had been shown. The almost awe-inspiring calmness and self-possession of the old lawyer was also not without its effect. Mr. Bulpit accompanied him to the dining-room.

"We won't talk until you have had your lunch, sir," he said.

He hit upon "sir" as a kind of compromise. It was too risky to address this young man as "my lord," and "sir" was the happy mean.

While Ralph ate some cold meat, which the butler served as composedly as if nothing in this world could surprise him, Mr. Bulpit went and looked out of the window; then, as Ralph said, "I've finished; I'm ready," he led the way back to the library and motioned Ralph to a chair.

"Now, sir, we shall be happy to listen to you," he said.

Ralph began his story, and Mr. Bulpit jotted down some notes on a sheet of paper.

"My father was Ralph Percival," said the young man. "He was an actor. He played under the name of Bannister. I was born in London—"

Mr. Bulpit looked up.

"Have you the certificate?" he asked, quietly.

"Yes, I have," replied Ralph. "I've got the certificate of my mother's marriage and my birth, and his death, too. I found the two first amongst some old papers of hers. I don't know why I kept them. I was on the point of throwing them on the fire. You see, I hadn't any idea who he was, and what I was," he explained, with a short laugh. "But I kept them. Here they are. I'm afraid they're rather dirty. I've carried them about with me, and papers get creased and dirty."

He took out a greasy pocket-book, and extracted the certificates, which were, as he said, dirty enough to need an apology. Mr. Bulpit looked at them, with a sphinx-like countenance.

"They appear to be perfectly correct, but—" he said.

Ralph's face flushed.

"What do you mean by 'but'?" he demanded, half sullenly, half fiercely.

Mr. Bulpit regarded him calmly.

"They prove that Ralph Percival married, that a son was born, but they do not prove that you are that son, sir," he explained.

Ralph laughed.

"There'll be no trouble about that," he said, confidently. "There are dozens of persons who can prove that. I can give you their names. I was acting with my father in the provinces. I lived with him until he died.

He got up, and, uninvited, helped himself to a glass of sherry. It was a significant little act, and not without its effect upon the two men who watched him. Then, warmed by the wine, he gave them the story of his life, which, with one important omission, was correct enough. He said nothing about Nita.

"I've been poor and struggling all my life," he said, "but I've done nothing to be ashamed of, as you'll find when you make enquiries; and all I can say is that if the son of Ralph Percival, who went by the name of Bannister, is the heir to the title, then I'm that man."

Mr. Bulpit asked him some questions.

"How did you discover that we were searching for the heir?" he asked.

For the first time the young man faltered. The question brought up before him with hideous vividness the miserable room in which he had sat—was it only yesterday?

"I read it in a newspaper," he said. "It was yesterday. It was by the merest chance that I saw it. I guessed the truth—who I was—all in a moment, and I came on at once. I've told you the whole story, and now I want to know what to do, what you are going to do?"

"I will make enquiries immediately," said Mr. Bulpit, with a slight accession of respect in his voice; for he had been "listening with his ears," as the Spaniards say, and he was pretty nearly convinced that the man before him was the missing heir.

"How long will it take?" asked Ralph. "Look here, Mr. Bulpit, I'm—I'm poor. I haven't a penny in the world."

Mr. Bulpit nodded comprehendingly, and took some bank-notes out of his purse.

"I will make you an advance," he said.

Ralph tried to take the notes slowly, carelessly; but his fingers closed over them spasmodically, and his dark eyes glistened.

"Thanks!" he said, endeavouring to speak nonchalantly. "I can repay you when you've proved my claim. You'll prove it all right."

"I hope so, for your sake, sir," said Mr. Bulpit, gravely. "Meanwhile, if you will permit me to advise you, I think you had better return to London. By the way, what is your address?"

Ralph answered readily enough.

"I haven't any. I've slept in common lodging-houses for some time past; I told you I was poor. I've been out of a 'shop'—I mean engagement," he corrected himself, as if ashamed of the slang term.

"I quite understand," said Mr. Bulpit. "Better go to an hotel; say, the Charing Cross, and I will communicate with you as soon as possible."

But this did not suit Ralph. It would be awkward for a man who was supposed to be on his way to Klondike to be met in London.

"Thanks, but I've had enough of London," he said, rather sullenly. "I hate it. I'd rather stay somewhere near here—near my property."

Mr. Bulpit did not appear to notice this burst of confidence.

"Very good. There is a comfortable hotel in the town, the Bull—"

"That will do," said Ralph, rising; "and now I'll go at once. I'd like to look over the place; but"—he glanced down at his clothes, which, though he had brushed them, looked painfully seedy and shabby in their luxurious surroundings—"I'm not fit to be seen."

Mr. Bulpit said that he was going to drive back to Market Ratton, and that he would be pleased to take him, and Ralph accepted with a gracious air, very different to the manner with which he had entered the Hall. Every moment his confidence was growing; and as the lawyer's phaeton was brought round, Mr. Ralph Percival stood on the terrace and looked about him with a proprietorial air. But he was still uncomfortably conscious of his shabby attire, and every now and then eyed the old butler and the servants with a suspicious and ready-to-be-offended expression on his dark face.

As they drove toward Market Ratton, Mr. Ralph Percival began to ask questions: How long would it be before he could take possession? Was the estate as large as the newspapers said? Was there much money, and was it available, so that he could have some at once? Whose house was that they had just passed? and so on.

Mr. Bulpit replied to the various questions with his usual gravity. The estate consisted of so many acres; yes, there was a great deal of invested money. If Mr. Percival could prove his identity as the son of Ralph Percival, he would be in immediate possession of a large sum. The house they had just passed was Hatherley, the seat of Lord Hatherley.

All the while he was satisfying the young man's curiosity, Mr. Bulpit was studying him; and though he felt assured that he was the missing heir, the old lawyer was not altogether pleased with the conviction.

Ralph Percival was on his best behaviour, but there was a something—something in the tone of the voice, in the glint of the dark eyes, the twist of the under-lip, which Mr. Bulpit did not like.

They had nearly reached Market Ratton, when they met a dog-cart driven tandem.

A young girl, lovely and fresh as a summer morning, was driving, and an aristocratic-looking gentleman sat beside her.

Ralph gazed eagerly at them as they approached.

"Who is that?" he asked, almost under his breath.

"That is Lord Hatherley—the house we have just passed—"

"Yes, yes; but the girl, the lady?" interrupted Ralph, eagerly.

"Lady Mary, his daughter," said Mr. Bulpit, rather curtly.

He touched the horse with his whip as he spoke, for he had no intention of stopping and introducing this, as yet unproved, claimant; but when she saw them, Mary had said to her father:

"There is dear old Mr. Bulpit, father. Who is the young man with him?"

"A stranger," replied Lord Hatherley. "Don't know him. Good heavens!" he broke off in a low voice.

"What is the matter, father?" asked Mary.

"Why, he is the image of Lord Ratton! He must be—Pull up, Mary!"

So Lady Mary, nothing loath, pulled up and looked with gentle interest and curiosity at the young man who was being driven towards them.

There was nothing for it, and Mr. Bulpit, with a pursing of the lips, had to stop; but he hoped to be able to get on again with a mere lifting of his hat; but Lord Hatherley, with natural curiosity, eyed the young man intently.

"Just been to the Hall, Mr. Bulpit?" he asked, pleasantly.

"Yes, my lord," said the lawyer; and he added, reluctantly: "And I am going back with this gentleman to Market Ratton on business. He informs me that his name is Ralph Percival, and that he is the heir we are looking for."

Ralph tried to force a smile; but his eyes caught his shabby coat-sleeve, his face flushed, and he looked covertly and sideways at the two in the dog-cart.

"God bless my heart!" exclaimed Lord Hatherley; and he was preparing to get down, when Mr. Bulpit, remarking, with a short frown, "I'm afraid I must get on, my lord," drove on.

Ralph Percival's face crimsoned, and as he raised his hat, a little too elaborately, he turned, half sullenly, to Bulpit.

"Why didn't you stop? He was getting down—he wanted to—to know me."

"There is plenty of time—when you have proved your claim, sir," replied Bulpit, rather sternly.

Ralph twisted his lip and laughed, but not too pleasantly.

"Perhaps you're right to be cautious. But, look here, Mr. Bulpit, you'll find I'm the man right enough."

"I must wait until I do before I introduce you."

"Oh, that's all right," assented Ralph. "I say, she's a beautiful girl, if you like."

This tribute to Lady Mary's loveliness jarred upon Mr. Bulpit, and he closed his lips firmly.

"I suppose they're my nearest neighbours, eh?" added Ralph, after a moment's consideration.

Mr. Bulpit nodded rather coldly.

"Yes. By the way, there's one question I forgot to ask you."

"Is there? I shouldn't have thought so," remarked Ralph. "You seemed to me to about cover the bill. What was it?"

"Whether you were married or not," said Mr. Bulpit.

The moment he had asked the question he was angry with himself for having done so, for it would seem as if it had been suggested by the meeting with Lady Mary, and he was so engrossed by the reflection that he did not notice the sudden pallor of his companion's face.

The pallor was only momentary, and the reply came promptly enough:

"No, I'm not married, thank goodness! Haven't had enough money to get married on. Is there any other question—such as have I had the measles or the small-pox? If so, ask it by all means. I haven't anything to conceal."

But a moment or two afterwards he said, as if he had been considering the last assertion:

"Though, I suppose, it won't be necessary to publish the whole of my life for the amusement of the public? It won't be pleasant for me, in my position, to go about amongst my equals, if they know that I've had to rough it—that I've—Well, I don't want to be known all my life as Ralph Bannister, the strolling player, for instance."

"There will be no need for such publicity," said Bulpit. "If you establish your claim to the satisfaction of the House of Lords, that will suffice. No one need know anything of your past life."

"What I mean is, I shouldn't like to become a newspaper sensation," explained Ralph as casually as he could.

Mr. Bulpit nodded.

"I understand. Here is your hotel. If you will allow me to offer you a word of advice, sir, I would advise you not to say too much about your affairs. There is, as you may know, a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip—"

Ralph got down from the phaeton before Bulpit had finished, and stood on the pavement looking up at him with sullen and repressed anger.

"*Look here!* you mean well, I daresay," he said; "but

don't go too far. I'm not an impostor, though you seem to treat me like one. And I'm not the sort to go gassing around. And, look here, Mr. Bulpit, if you don't care to undertake my business, I daresay I can find another solicitor who'd be glad to do so; at any rate, I shouldn't have any difficulty in finding one who'd be more civil."

Bulpit coloured, with something like self-reproach mixed with the anger roused by this speech.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "I had no intention of offending you. At the same time, sir, I must remind you that I am at present the solicitor to the Ratton estate. When you have proved your claim to the title and estates, and not till then, shall I become *your* legal adviser; and whether I do so then will rest with myself as well as you."

Ralph Percival's eyes dropped, and he forced an apologetic smile.

"Oh, we don't want to quarrel," he said. "You don't make allowances. Just put yourself in my place."

The old lawyer relented, and he took the hand the young man held up to him.

"No apology is needed. You are right; I did not make allowance for the circumstances in which you find yourself, sir," he said, with the readiness of a gentleman to own his shortcoming. "As you say, yours is a difficult place. But, all the same," he added, "I should not talk too freely."

Ralph nodded.

"You'll find me here when you want me," he said as pleasantly as he could, "and I hope it will be soon."

Mr. Bulpit drove away to pack a bag and take the next train to town, and Ralph Percival entered the hotel. For the life of him he could not suppress a certain amount of swagger, and he enjoyed the start of amazement and curiosity which the landlord gave when the young man wrote his name, "Ralph Percival," in the visitors' book.

He engaged the best suite of rooms, called for a brandy and soda, and then fingering the bank-notes in his trousers pockets, went into the town. As he strolled down the street, one or two persons who met him looked after him curiously and earnestly, and he enjoyed the interest he was creating; enjoyed the start of surprise with which the tailor greeted the —"My name's Percival"—he longed to say "Lord Ratton," but was afraid of Mr. Bulpit—"Ralph Percival; send them to the Bull. I'll pay for these now, please."

He purchased a ready-made suit at another shop, a watch and gold albert—it was the first gold albert he had ever worn

—and sundry other things more or less necessary, and returned to the hotel in time for the dinner—duck and green peas, and gooseberry tart with cream—which he had ordered, together with a bottle of one of the best brands of champagne. He ate this—to him luxurious—meal in solitary grandeur; but later in the evening he sauntered down-stairs and into the billiard-room.

It was full, and there was something like a crowd at the bar; for the news that a gentleman had been brought to the Bull by Mr. Bulpit, that he had given his name as Percival, the family name of the Rattons, and that he bore an extraordinary resemblance to the late earl, had spread through the town.

Ralph swaggered to a seat, and as he watched the play drank a glass of whiskey and soda; but he kept his mouth shut. The old lawyer's caution, "There's many a slip," haunted him. And, besides, he had a great deal to think about. The vision of the lovely girl whom he had met in the road rose before him as he sipped his whiskey and smoked the Bull's best cigar.

It floated pleasantly before him as the landlord, obsequiously carrying a plated candelabra, preceded him up the stairs; but as he closed his eyes and tried to sleep, another vision rose: the picture of a squalid room, lit by a dim and evil-smelling lamp, the radius of which showed the wan face and worn figure of Nita, his wife.

It haunted him even in his sleep; and he woke in the middle of the night bathed in sweat and shivering. But he thrust the vision from him, and muttering:

"It's all right. She'll never know!" he turned over and fell asleep again.

It would be impossible to describe the state of suspense in which he spent the week that followed, or to tell what it cost him to refrain from standing in the High Street of the town and crying out: "I am the Earl of Ratton!" but the fear of Mr. Bulpit was before his eyes, and he did restrain himself. Every day he walked or drove out to Ratton Hall, and stood gazing at the house in a kind of fever. Now and again he met the steward, and learnt from him the extent of the estates; and as he listened, the blood ran like quicksilver in his veins.

At last, on a Tuesday night, Mr. Bulpit entered the Bull. He had driven straight from the station, and looked graver and grimmer than usual.

Ralph happened to be standing at the bar, a glass of whis-

key and water before him, and Mr. Bulpit went straight up to him.

"How do you do, my lord?" he said, raising his hat.

Ralph gasped, set down the glass which he had clutched, and gazed at him eagerly.

"'My lord'?" he said, eagerly. "Then—"

Mr. Bulpit turned to the landlord, who was looking with breathless interest from the lawyer to the young man.

"This gentleman is the Earl of Ratton, Mr. Brown," he said, gravely. "Shall we go up to your room, my lord?"

With a white face, his knees knocking together, the young man preceded him.

The Earl of Ratton! The Earl of Ratton!

CHAPTER IX.

To return to the Isle of Refuge.

Rath was not quite easy in his mind about the "bargain" he had made with the strange being whom he had mistaken for a boy. His father had charged him to give men a welcome, but to keep women at arm's-length; and Rath had already disobeyed him!

But he consoled himself with the reflection that he had refused to have anything to do with Stella's mother, that Stella herself was scarcely a woman, and that they had agreed to regard her as a boy. Besides, her agreement that he could shoot her if she proved "dangerous" carried a deal of weight with him, and seemed, indeed, unanswerable; though what she meant by "dangerous" he had not the least idea.

His ignorance of the world, and more especially of women, was of that intense kind which one would expect to find in a being who had lived with only one male companion on an unfrequented isle, and was ignorant of the art of reading and writing.

But though he had certain misgivings, and his conscience pricked him, Stella appeared to think the trouble had been settled in the most satisfactory manner.

"Mind, I mean to keep to our bargain," she said when she ran back to him an hour or two later. Of course, she made no apology for keeping him waiting. The youngest and most unsophisticated of her sex seem to regard the wasting of a man's time as their privilege. "You've got to teach me how to do things—hunt and—and—well, all the things you do. And I'm to help you with your work. And there are things that I can do that you can't?"

"What are they?" asked Rath, with the directness which came of his peculiar upbringing. His father and he had grown to economise their speech, and Rath reversed the cynical adage, and used language to reveal his thoughts, not conceal them.

"Why, you can't sew, for instance," said Stella.

They were walking in the direction of the pine wood, and the girl's step was lighter and her face brighter than it had been since she was cast ashore, and she looked up at the grave face of the lad with a smile in her beautiful eyes.

"Yes, I can," he said. "I made the bed covering in the hut."

Stella tossed her chin contemptuously.

"Oh! if you call that sewing! I call it botching," she said. "I mean sewing properly. I could make you"—she looked him over—"some shirts, for instance. You seem to want them."

Rath was not at all nettled by this piece of candour.

"I buy them of the Indians," he said.

"And a pretty price you pay, I expect," she retorted, with an air of superior intelligence.

"I give them pelts."

"What on earth are they?"

"Skins; seal and bear. And sometimes the breast feathers of the sea-birds."

"Do you know what a seal-skin is worth?" she asked, with an air of anticipatory triumph.

"Two hundred Winchester cartridges, a cask of sugar, and ten yards of calico," he replied, promptly.

She laughed him to scorn.

"It's worth pounds and pounds!" she said. "Why, only rich people can afford furs! The Indians cheat you, I dare-say."

"I don't know anything about money," he remarked, placidly. "It would be no use in the isle, while cartridges and sugar and calico are."

She pondered over this for a moment or two.

"Yes, of course; but you ought to get more for them; and that's where I shall be of use to you, for, you see, I know better than you do the worth of things. And now show me where you live."

Rath led her to the hollow tree. He had rigged up a small shade, or awning, over the entrance, and Stella passed under it and looked in. It was a poor place compared with the hut.

The bed consisted of a heap of dried bracken. There was no furniture.

Stella gazed at it remorsefully.

"It's like a bear's den," she said.

That was all she said; but she turned away with that peculiar expression in her eyes which a woman wears when she is resolving upon something.

"And now, what were you going to do when I met you with that gun? I hope you're glad that you didn't shoot me?"

"I don't know yet," replied truthful Rath. "I was going to try and get a deer. There are some round the point."

"I'll come with you," she said, promptly, "and you shall give me my first lesson. I told my mother that I might be away some time."

He assented with a nod, and they went on through the little wood.

As they neared the clearing beyond, Rath dropped on all fours, and began to crawl, and Stella, after a moment's hesitation, followed his example; but when they had covered some little distance—it seemed at least twenty miles to her—she whispered, for Rath had motioned her to keep quiet:

"I can't go on much longer."

"Hush!" he whispered back. "There are two feeding just behind that rock. We will get between them and the wood."

"Is there any—danger?" asked Stella.

He glanced back at her, not contemptuously, but with a kind of speculative wonder.

"Why, are you afraid? No; they are small things; they are not bears."

They crawled round the rock, and presently Stella saw two graceful animals a little larger than sheep.

"Oh, how pretty!" she whispered, scarcely above her breath. "Isn't it a shame to kill them!"

He motioned her to silence, and slid the Winchester towards her.

"You shall have the shot," he said. "Aim at the shoulder of the first one. Look down the gun until—"

But Stella, in her excitement had fired without waiting for further instructions. The bullet soared towards the sky, and she dropped the Winchester, and, with a cry of pain, rubbed her shoulder.

Rath rose and regarded her contemplatively.

"*You didn't* hold the rifle tight enough against you, and

it kicked. I remember it did that the first time I shot when I was a boy."

Stella kept the tears out of her eyes, but still rubbed her shoulder ruefully.

"Did I hit it?" she asked.

Rath pointed to the two deer rapidly vanishing in the distance.

"Never mind," he said, consolingly; "I'll give you some lessons. You shall aim at a tree-trunk. I should think that would be big enough," he added, innocent of irony. "Does your shoulder hurt? Let me look at it."

But Stella suddenly ceased rubbing, and drew back.

"No, no; it's all right," she said, quickly.

"If it hurts much you'd better rub it with some bear's grease. You'll find it in the cupboard in the hut. It's no use trying after deer now; they've gone for a week, at least. We will go down to the boat and get some sea trout. They ought to be rising now. You must get me the rod and tackle from the hut."

"Are you afraid of my mother, that you don't come in?" she asked, as they walked towards the hut.

"No, I'm not afraid," he said. "But she's a woman, and I don't like women," he replied, gravely.

"Why, I'm a wo— Oh, no! I forgot. No, no; I'm a boy. Don't mind what I said."

He waited a few yards from the hut while she got the fishing tackle, and they went down to the beach. Rath ran out the rather heavy boat as if it were as light as a match-box, but first he made Stella get inside that she should not wet her feet.

"The water rots your boots, and you won't get another pair until the Indians come," he remarked.

She opened her eyes at this ungallant explanation.

"I thought you thought I should catch cold."

He stared at her.

"Do you catch cold every time you get your feet wet?" he asked.

"No, no; oh, no!" she responded, hastily.

He rowed the boat clear of the reef, and took it towards a bend of the island where a stream ran over the sands into the sea.

"You can row, can't you?" he asked.

"A—a little," she replied, doubtfully.

He gave her the oars, and stood at the bow of the boat and began to fish. Stella watched eagerly, and uttered a cry

of delight as a sea trout, gleaming like a bar of silver, leapt into the air, and presently lay kicking in the bottom of the boat.

"That's better than shooting," she said, her eyes sparkling.

He signed to her to take the rod. The boat was rolling a little, and of course she nearly fell over the thwart; but he caught her with his strong hand, and held her upright, as he showed her how to handle the rod and throw the fly.

"It's heavy," she said.

"It's a light rod," he responded, calmly.

Stella performed the usual extraordinary tricks which mark the first attempt, and once or twice Rath had to duck his head to dodge the fly as it whirled around, and he smiled at the girl's flushed face and evident annoyance at her clumsiness; but presently a trout rose and took the fly—the fish were swarming at that spot—and she uttered a cry of triumph; but her triumph was short, for the trout leapt, she failed to lower her rod in time, as Rath directed her, and the fish got away. She stamped her foot, and, of course, turned on Rath as if it were his fault.

"It's hard—being a boy, isn't it?" he said, gravely. "But you'll learn in time."

"Put me ashore!" she said, in accents of despair; but he shook his head.

"Not yet. Try again; and do as I tell you this time," he said, coolly.

She looked at him indignantly; but, with a pout, took up the rod again, and presently she had landed her first fish.

"Take it off the hook!" she said, delightedly.

"No; you must learn to take it off yourself," he said as calmly as before. He showed her how to hold the fish, and watched her with a smile, as she, gingerly and with strange grimaces, performed the operation. Then she resumed her fishing, and was so absorbed in it that she forgot all about her companion. And Rath, noiselessly plying the oars, gazed at her thoughtfully. He was asking himself why it was almost as pleasant to watch her as to fish himself. The sleeve of her blouse-shirt had come unfastened and fell below her elbow, leaving the white arm bare. It was as white as snow, and looked so fragile and delicate that he wondered how she could hold the rod, and the sun shone on the soft, rippling hair and turned it to glistening silk. She reminded him of one of the sea-gulls, or a young deer.

She turned suddenly with a sigh.

"I am tired!" she said. "How many have I caught?"

"Ten," he said, counting them. "You can go ashore now; but I will go on fishing, for they are rising fast. You miss half of them. But you have done very well for the first time."

"Thank you," she said, with the tilt of the chin to which he was already becoming acccustomed. "How long shall you be?" she asked, as she leapt from the boat which he had pulled well on to the beach.

"An hour," he answered, glancing at the sky.

She nodded and ran off, and he pulled out again. When he had finished fishing, he strung the trout together and carried them to the hollow tree which was now his home. But at the entrance he stopped with amazement. On top of the heap of bracken was spread the seal-skin coat from the hut and a rug; a tin cup and a jug, and similar articles were hung up on the natural walls, and on an upturned box was laid his supper.

He regarded this accession of luxury for a moment or two in surprised silence; then he looked round, and even called "Stella! Stella!" intending to thank her, and persuade her to take the seal-skin coat back, at least, for she might want it—the nights were sometimes cold. But no response came to his call, and after awhile he sat down to the food; for he was hungry.

Presently, with steps so light that even he did not hear them, Stella stole from the shelter of the trees, and, keeping out of sight, looked in upon him. She watched him for a moment or two; then, with a little sigh of gratification, she stole away.

Day followed day, and the bargain, the strange compact, was carried out with scrupulous care by both parties. Rath was patience itself, and when he found that to laugh or even smile at his companion's mistakes and failures made her angry or sorrowful, he learnt to suppress his amusement and only became more patient. A woman is quick to observe and to imitate. Stella proved an apt pupil; very soon, almost incredibly soon, she learnt to fish and shoot, to manage the boat and canoe, to milk the cow and make the butter. And with all this knowledge she was acquiring something still more valuable—health and strength.

In very truth, the change in her was extraordinary. She was thin and pale and delicate when she had drifted to the Isle of Refuge, but day by day her graceful figure filled out; and though she was still slim and lithe as a young Indian, she was strong, with a strength that surprised herself. In that

glorious air fatigue seemed impossible. She could walk any distance, and stalking the deer was no exertion to her now. And with her strength her beauty grew to a more pronounced loveliness. From a slip of a girl she was developing into superb womanhood.

As a natural consequence of her splendid condition, she was always in good spirits. As she went about she sang, sometimes in an under-tone, but often with full and glorious tone; and her mother, who mostly kept to the hut, or mooned about the beach, listened to her with a kind of dull wonder.

"You seem happy, Stella," she remarked, one day, as the hut rang with the girl's voice.

Stella stopped her song, and paused in the act of washing a plate.

"Happy, mother; yes," she admitted. "I am so well, and— Oh! I don't know what it is; perhaps I have no time to be unhappy."

"And yet we are cast on this desert island!" said the mother, fretfully.

"Not a desert island, mother," Stella corrected her, not for the first time. "Think what a lovely place it is, and how much it provides for us! Why, we seem to have everything we want!"

The woman looked at her impatiently.

"You forget that we are out of the world; that you are growing up wild like—like a savage! Your face and hands are brown, and—and—"

Stella held out her hands, and eyed them laughingly.

"They are brown, mother, and my arms, too; but see how strong they are!" she said, soothingly. "Oh! it's good to be well and strong, and to be able to do things."

"Some day we may escape from this horrible place," said Mrs. Mordaunt, "and then you will be ashamed of this life—ashamed to mix with your own kind."

Stella looked through the open door-way at the exquisite view bathed in a sunlight which made the air tingle deliciously, and she sighed; but whether at the prospect of escape or not, who shall say?

But she did not take up her song again, and her mother's words haunted her; so that afternoon when she met Rath, she said:

"Do vessels ever pass here, Rath?"

He started slightly, for he had been looking at her in a kind of brown study. He, too, had noticed the change in her, and sometimes he would lean on his rifle or stop the

swing of his hoe or fishing-rod, and gaze at her in a dreamy way.

"No," he said. "Why?"

She hesitated a moment, as she went on with the net she was knitting.

"If—if one came and saw us, it would take us away," she said.

He was cutting some stakes for the net, and he paused, knife in hand.

"Do you want to go?" he asked, very quietly.

She bent lower over the net.

"My mother," she said; "she—she is always longing to go. It is natural."

He made a movement of impatience.

"Yes; but you?"

"I don't know," she replied, half doubtfully, and in a still lower voice. "I have got resigned. The isle is so beautiful—and I am so well—" she faltered. "But if a vessel saw us, we could all go, Rath."

He shook his head.

"No; I should not leave the island," he said.

She glanced up at him with a startled expression in her eyes, but said nothing.

"If you want to look for a vessel, you should go to the north point," he said, after a silence. "There would be more chance of sighting one from there."

"Will you come and show me this afternoon?" she asked, almost inaudibly.

He nodded.

"Yes," he said, curtly. "We will go when I have finished these stakes."

She did not thank him; and presently, when he threw down the last stake, and, closing his knife, said, "I'm ready," she looked up with innocent enquiry in her eyes.

"What for? Oh! yes, we'll go—if you like," she responded, indifferently.

He got his gun, and they started. Both were unusually silent for a time, Rath walking with his eyes downcast, instead of on the look-out for something to shoot, as they generally were. But presently Stella began to sing in a low voice; but her singing, which usually made him so happy, only increased the strange sadness which made his heart heavy. Insensibly he had grown accustomed to the constant companionship of this boy-girl whom Providence had cast upon his care, and the prospect of losing her filled him with

vague dismay. And yet he had been content enough until she came. Why was it?

They always walked quickly, and soon they came through the woods and approached the coast-line. As they went along the edge of the cliff, Stella paused and looked down.

"How lovely those are, Rath!" she said, pointing to some blue flowers which grew on the precipitous sides of the cliff.

Her love for flowers was always a source of wonder to him, and he often gathered a bunch for her in his wanderings.

"There are more and larger ones farther on," he said.

"And look—oh! look at those lovely kind of lilies down there!" she exclaimed, nodding down at the valley beneath them. "I must go and get them. Wait for me, Rath; I'll not be long."

Most girls would have considered the distance a pretty considerable one, but to Stella it was as nothing; and she half ran, half walked down the hill, and in a few minutes had gathered a bunch of the white lilies. Then she looked up for the easiest way of ascending, and began to climb up again. There was a kind of path through the bracken, and she was following this when suddenly she saw an object lying in her way which caused her to stop and stare with amazement; for it was a pick such as miners use. It was rusty, its handle was broken and worm-eaten, and it was half hidden by the bracken which had grown up round it. She took it up, then dropped it, as if smitten by a vague dread, and hurried on to tell Rath; but she had not gone a dozen steps before she saw something that changed the vague dread to a very actual one.

Not a dozen yards from the rusty and mouldering pick lay a human skeleton.

She did not shriek, but she stood for a moment as if chained to the spot, her face white, her eyes starting. Then the spell of horror relaxed, and crying, "Rath! Rath!" she bounded away and up the hill.

Breathless with fear, she reached the top, and, shaking in every limb, looked round for Rath; but he was nowhere to be seen. She ran along, calling to him as one calls for protection from a nameless horror. But there came no answer; and suddenly, exhausted by her emotion, she flung herself on the ground and covered her eyes with her hands, as if to shut out the sight that haunted her. She lay like this for a moment or so, then Rath's absence smote on her consciousness.

She rose and ran again, still calling, and presently found the Winchester lying on the edge of the cliff. She went down on her hands and knees and peered over; and as she

did so there rose from her lips a cry which would have pierced a heart of flint—a cry of terror keener and more intense than that which the sight of the skeleton had evoked—a cry of infinite horror and bereavement.

For, lying on the beach below, his arms stretched out, his upturned face white and death-like, was Rath.

CHAPTER X.

STELLA remained motionless for a moment or two, clutching the grass that grew on the edge of the cliff, and gazing down, with white and horror-stricken face, at the figure stretched out on the beach beneath.

The air was so fine and clear that, great as the distance was, she could see his face distinctly, and her heart stood still; for his face was like that of a dead man, and he lay without life or motion. She was paralysed with terror and grief for a while, then she leant still further, and perilously, over the edge, to see whether she could get down.

There was a narrow ledge running slantingly some distance down the steep side; but she knew that she would not be able to keep her footing on it for a single minute; the only way of reaching him was to go down to the valley, and she set off running as even she had never run before. It seemed to her ages before she got to the sea level and the opening on to the beach, and having gained that, she had, of course, to get back to the spot on which Rath had fallen. The part of the beach she first traversed was broken by boulders and large pebbles; but she sprang from one to the other almost unconsciously, and at the imminent peril of her neck, and presently, panting and breathless, was kneeling beside Rath.

"Rath! Rath!" she called to him, not loudly, but in an agony which almost choked her. She drew his head against her heaving bosom, and fearfully, tremblingly, felt for his heart. At first she could detect no pulsation, and a cry broke from her—the woman's cry when something more precious than her own life has been torn from her. But presently the change of position sent the blood back to his heart, and she felt it flutter under her hand, and the cry of bereavement gave place to one of almost delirious joy. She lowered him gently and ran at racing speed to one of the pools in the rocks, and dipping her handkerchief into the water, tore back, took his head on its palpitating pillow again, and bathed his forehead, her great eyes devouring his face with anxiety and eagerness, her quivering lips murmuring anxiously:

"Oh, Rath! Rath! Don't die, Rath! don't die!"

She wet the handkerchief thrice, and after a time her efforts were rewarded; his heart gave a kind of bound, he moved slowly, painfully, as if he were being drawn back to life reluctantly, and opened his eyes.

She drew him closer to her, and in gratitude for his goodness in coming back to her, put her lips to his forehead. It was well for her that he was still unconscious.

But presently he came to, and, with a sigh, opened his lips.

"How did you come down?" was his first faltering question.

"Oh, Rath! Rath!" she panted, "how did it happen? I—I thought you were killed! How *did* you fall over? You who can walk on a couple of inches of rock without swerving. Tell me!"

"How did you come down—not down the cliff?" he asked, almost sternly. "It was dangerous—foolish!"

At that moment of excitement and joy and relief, she did not notice that his first thought on recovering had been of her; but it came upon her afterwards.

"No, no; I came round. But, Rath, how did you fall? And are you very much hurt?" anxiously.

"I don't know; I don't think so. I'm glad you didn't try and climb down; it's very steep," he said, gravely. "I don't know whether I've broken any of my bones. I'll stand up and see."

"No, no; rest for a moment or two." Unconsciously she drew him still closer. "I'm—I'm afraid to let you see, in case you are hurt! And there's no doctor, no one but me, and I'm such a helpless, ignorant girl—I mean boy!"

He looked up at her strangely, curiously, even in this moment of weakness.

"Why are you so distressed?" he asked.

Stella gazed at him as if perplexed by the question.

"I—I thought you were dead—"

"All men must die some time," he said, with unconscious philosophy.

—"And now that you're alive, I don't know that you haven't broken a leg or an arm. And what shall I do if you have? Isn't it enough to—to upset me?" she added, glad at having found a reason.

He rose and stretched himself slowly, and she watched him in breathless suspense.

"I've broken nothing, I think," he said. "But I feel stiff and—giddy. I must have fallen on the back of my head.

and stunned myself. I remember my father falling from a rock and fainting. Yes, that was it."

She began to breathe again, and was about to utter her satisfaction, when her eye fell upon a bunch of blue flowers upon which he had been lying. They were smashed flat, of course. She covered them with her hand with the quick yet stealthy motion of which only a woman is capable.

"I am so glad! But sit down again and rest. Lean against that rock."

Rath obeyed reluctantly.

"I'm all right," he remarked, "or I shall be when this giddiness goes off. Funny! but all the sea is mixed with the sky, and that rock there is going round."

She saturated her handkerchief again, and kneeling beside him, bathed his forehead.

"That's good," he said, gravely. "It's lucky I wasn't alone, isn't it?"

Stella shuddered.

"You would have been there until the tide— Oh, don't let us think of it! Promise me, Rath, that you will never, never—"

"Go out without you," he said, with a smile. "That would be ridiculous, wouldn't it?"

"Well, you can promsie never, *never* to walk on the edge of the cliff again. I suppose you got giddy suddenly and fell over?"

He stared at her with mingled amusement and surprise.

"What?" he said, scornfully. "Got giddy—fell over—what nonsense! No; I was climbing down the cliff after some of those blue flowers you admired—you will remember I told you they grew bigger here—and I'd just got them and was coming up again, when a bit of the ledge gave way, my foot slipped, and I just remember catching in that old bush up there."

He pointed half-way up the cliff, and Stella raised her eyes to the spot and shuddered.

"How wicked and foolish of you to attempt it, and all for a few stupid flowers," she said, with anger and rebuke in her voice, but the god of love knows what emotion in her virgin heart.

"Why not?" he asked, calmly, "you wanted them, and I could have got them easily enough if the ledge hadn't given way. But I *did* get them! I remember hanging on to them as I fell. Where are they?"

He looked round about the spot where he had fallen, but

he could not see them; which was not surprising, seeing that Stella had slipped them under her shirt, and that they were at that moment lying on her heart.

"Oh, never mind," she said, impatiently and indifferently. "What does it matter? I don't want them."

"Why, you said you did," he remarked, as if rather disgusted by this instance of woman's inconsistency and caprice.

"Well, I don't want them now, at any rate," she said, with her chin in the air, and her hand pressed softly against the flowers.

"Oh, all right," he said, indifferently. "But if you did, I could climb up there for some more. I shouldn't slip on the same ledge—"

She interrupted him, with a flash of her eyes:

"You must be mad, or think I am! *What!* Go up there again, and after a few miserable flowers that no one cares a button about! Really—"

"Oh, very well, very well," he broke in, knowing by experience that prompt acquiescence was the only way to stop her. "But this is the point you could see a vessel from if it happened to pass the island. You might come up here every day, any number of hours a day, and look out."

"Oh, it doesn't matter," she said. "It would be a great waste of time. Besides, you say it's very unlikely a vessel would pass. Do you feel giddy?"

He sighed again over this fresh instance of her inconsistency.

"I'm all right. You were all anxiety to see a vessel this morning," he continued.

"Was I? Well, I don't happen to be now," she retorted, snappishly. "This morning's one thing, this afternoon's another— What's that running down your neck?" she broke off to ask anxiously.

He put his hand up.

"Blood, I suppose."

"Oh!" She drew a long breath. "Let me bathe it for you."

But he rose resolutely.

"No, no; don't bother," he said, gravely. "There's quite enough time been wasted. I want to get some trout; and I'll have a swim and wash it off that way."

"You'll do no such thing," she said, sharply. "You'll just go straight home and lie down and sleep till to-morrow morning. Swim, indeed! After such a fall as that!"

She glanced up at the cliff, and shuddered.

He regarded her with the grave and tolerating smile of the strong man.

"Anyone would think I was a woman," he remarked. "Come! Strange where those flowers have gone!"

"It's my belief you didn't get them at all," she said, with a calm and appalling mendacity. "You must have—have dreamt it."

He stared at her for a minute, then walked on. She walked close beside him, glancing up at him anxiously out of the corners of her lovely eyes, and ready to catch him if he showed any signs of falling; but Rath strode on as if a tumble on the back of his head were of no consequence; and presently it was she who gave signs of weakness. The reaction from the stress and strain of her terror and grief set in, as it always does sooner or later with women. She grew pale, her breath came painfully; she lagged behind, toiling over the boulders and pebbles of the beach laboriously, and as they came within sight of the landing-place, she sank down on a rock, and sat with her hands tightly clasped.

Rath, missing the sound of her following footsteps, stopped and looked back.

"Come on," he said. "You've got to milk the cow to-night. I want to get the trout."

She tried to look as if nothing were the matter, and to speak as usual as she replied:

"I'll come presently. You go on."

But a catch and falter in her voice caught his attention, and he came back to her and stood over her.

"What's the matter?" he asked, with surprise.

"Nothing," she retorted, sharply. "What should there be? I'm tired, that's all."

As she spoke, her eyes filled with tears, and her bosom heaved.

"Is that all?" he said, calmly. "Yes, you look pale. I'll carry you—"

She rose and looked at him indignantly.

"Indeed you will not," she said; and the colour rushed to her face.

He eyed her with increased astonishment.

"Why not?" he demanded in a matter-of-fact tone.

"I don't want you to. I *hate* being carried; and I can walk quite well. Besides, I'm too heavy—"

To prove that she was capable of walking, she went on in front of him; but suddenly she stopped and staggered.

Rath put his arms round her and lifted her as if she were a

bundle of feathers, and her head sank on his shoulder, her face very close to his, and her eyes closed.

But her resignation was only for a moment; the next she struggled faintly.

"Put me down, please!" she commanded, peremptorily.

"Keep still!" he said, rather sternly. "You can't walk, and it's no trouble, or very little, carrying you—you're as light as a bundle of reeds—and we've wasted quite enough time already. You said you wanted to be a boy. Well, I don't think a boy would behave as you've behaved to-day. A boy knows his own mind—at least I did when I was a boy—but you don't seem to know yours. First you wanted the flowers," he went on sternly, "and then you didn't; and this morning you were all for seeing the place where you might sight a vessel, and now you don't seem to care a pin about it. Keep still, or I'll put you down!" he wound up, abruptly and half angrily.

With a sigh she ceased to struggle, and let her head fall back to its place on his shoulder, and her eyes closed; but presently he said, with disgust:

"And now you're crying! What on earth for? Who ever heard of a boy crying?"

"I'm—I'm *not* crying. How dare you!" she sobbed. "I'm laughing—laughing at the ridiculous figure you must look, carrying a great girl—boy—like me! Put me down before we get in sight of the hut, and my mother sees me. Ah, Rath!" with a deep and tender, a softly imploring note in her voice, "put me down now!"

He shrugged his shoulders and set her down.

"*You'd* better go and sleep, I think," he said, with tolerant contempt. "There, I'll milk the cow."

With drooping head, averting her tear-wet face from him, she left him and went up to the hut. Her mother was seated by the table, her head resting on her hand, and she looked up uneasily.

"Where have you been, Stella? I've been thinking we cannot remain here, making no attempt to escape. If we were alone it would be bad enough; but with this mad fellow—this half-savage boy, or man, whichever he may be—"

Stella grew crimson and her eyes flashed.

"Mother!" she said, half inarticulate with indignation. "He saved our lives, he has fed us, cared for us, is willing to risk his own life to—to gratify the least whim; and you call him mad, half savage! Oh!"

Then she broke into a laugh that sounded in itself half

age, and her hand went to her bosom where the blue flowers lay hidden.

Her mother eyed her with cold displeasure.

"What is the matter? Why do you speak to me in that fashion, Stella?"

The girl battled with her tears, and, rising, went to the woman and knelt beside her.

"Forgive me, mother! I—I didn't know what I was saying. We have been for a long walk, and I think I am tired. I will go and lie down. No, I'll get you some tea. You have been waiting all this time. Poor mother!" and with a kiss she rose and began to get the tea, tried even to sing while she was doing so; but her voice was weak, and faltered so often that presently she gave up the attempt, and grew very silent and thoughtful.

Rath milked the cow, then went trout fishing; got a fine basket, had a swim. In fact, carried out his programme in its entirety; then went home to the hollow tree. And, perhaps for the first time in his life, he felt thoroughly tired; indeed, he fell into a deep sleep the moment his head touched the pillow; so deep a sleep that he did not hear a footfall in the bush outside, which was well for Stella, as he would probably have fired in the direction of the sound without going through the form of a challenge.

Threading her way through the firs as noiselessly as possible, she stole nearer and nearer the spot where Rath lay. She had tried to sleep, but the vision of the motionless figure lying at the bottom of the cliff haunted her. Rath's accident had so completely absorbed her mind and heart as to drive out, for the time being, even the recollection of the grim discovery she had made on the hill; and she was tortured by the dread lest he should be ill, so tortured as to render inaction, much less sleep, impossible. She felt that she must ascertain whether or not he was uninjured. She would go to the hollow tree and call to him. If he answered her, she would know that he was all right, and would run back to the hut, and, released of the dread, be at peace.

As she came within a few feet of the tree, she called to him softly: "Rath!" and waited. No response came, and her heart beat thickly; for she knew that, as a rule, the slightest sound roused him. She called again; then her fear growing at his silence, she stole to the opening.

A crescent moon was shining, and its light fell on his outstretched form. So still, so calm was his face, that for a moment her heart was smitten with dread; she stole nearer

and bent over him. He was sleeping as soundly as an infant, his breath coming regularly and easily; and a smile of relief, of joy, flitted for a moment over her face. She bent over until her lips almost touched his; then with a start, a sudden thrill of shame, she rose, and with one glance over her shoulder—a tender, lingering glance—she fled noiselessly.

Although Rath, notwithstanding his fall and faint, slept so soundly, Stella was awake nearly all the night, and if she fell asleep, it was to dream of the skeleton she had seen on the hill, or of Rath lying stretched out, as if dead, on the beach; and once she moved and called upon him in accents of agony and despair.

And then again she dreamt that she was lying in his arms, as she had been when he carried her, his face so near to her that she could feel his breath upon her cheek; and at this dream her lips parted with a sigh of content and peace.

But lo! in the morning she was all the tom-boy again, and no one would have recognised in her the girl who had crept through the wood and watched over her sleeping friend.

He had overslept himself, and she taunted him with it in the morning in the charming little way women have when they want to hide their feelings.

"Talk of wasting time!" she remarked. "I've been waiting for hours for the milk. There will be no pudding to-day, that's one thing! And I thought you were going after some wood pigeons?"

"So I was, and am," he said, almost meekly. "Yes, I did oversleep myself for the first time in my life. I am sorry; there's so much to do. The winter will be here presently, and I want to get together the supplies. Have you got over your fright?"

"What fright?" she demanded, looking at him sharply.

He was rather taken aback by this cool rebuff.

"Why, I fancied that you were rather frightened when I tumbled down the cliff yesterday," he said.

"Oh, then?" she responded, indifferently. "Yes, I fancy I was a little; but I had a fright before then."

"A bear who was as much alarmed as you were?" he said, with a smile.

"Oh, no, it wasn't!" she retorted. "I've a great mind not to tell you. It was something I saw when I was coming up the hill after I'd got the lilies. No, I won't tell you what it was; I'll show it to you."

"I'd better take my gun and shoot it, or it will frighten you again," he said.

"It won't care for your gun, Rath," she said, gravely.

When they had got through the necessary work of the morning, they set out, and Stella was unusually quiet; so quiet—for generally she talked all the time—that Rath, as he strode beside her with his gun over his shoulder, glanced at her curiously and thoughtfully.

They made their way along the valley, and as they were ascending the hill by the kind of narrow path or clearing, Stella stopped and laid her hand on his arm.

"Be prepared, Rath," she said, rather solemnly.

"I always am," he replied, shifting his gun over his arm.

She shook her head, and her face grew pale as they reached the pick.

"*That!*" he said, with grave surprise and good-tempered scorn. "That is only a pick-axe! But how did it come here?" he added, quickly. "See, the handle's rotten, just a mass of dry rot; but the iron pick is all right, and will be useful. I wanted one badly. How did it come here?"

"I'll show you, Rath," she said in a low voice; and she led him to the skeleton, but drew back behind him as she pointed to it.

He started, and leaning on his gun, gazed at it in silence for a moment.

"It's a man," he said. "Poor fellow!"

"How did it come here—who was it, and what was he doing? And why did he die out here in the open, Rath?"

He shook his head.

"Who knows? He must have been here and died a long time ago. I never knew that anyone had been here before us. A bear may have come upon him suddenly, or he fell sick, or a snake may have bitten him. Who can tell?"

"But what was he doing here with that pick-axe, Rath? Oh, I know! Coal!"

Rath smiled at the idea.

"Why should anyone dig for coal when he has all this wood to use?" and he swept his hand towards the thick pine woods. "No, it wasn't coal. I must dig a grave and bury him, poor fellow. Stella!"

"Well?" she asked.

He was silent a moment; then he said, quietly:

"That is how I should have died and—and been, if you had not come; how I shall die, with no one to bury me, when you go."

She shuddered, and her lips quivered.

"Don't, Rath! What are you looking for? Let us go. I don't like this place."

"Wait a moment," he said. He went up higher and began to push the undergrowth aside with his feet, and presently he found a place where the bush was thinner, as if it had started growth at a much later period than the rest, and here the ground had been broken. "It was here he was working. I wonder if this was what he was digging for?" he said, picking up a rough piece of rock. "It's an odd-looking stone, isn't it? See how the yellow in it sparkles in the sun, Stella?"

Stella, who had kept quite close to him, took the stone in her hands and examined it, then she uttered a low cry of amazement and awe.

"Rath! don't you know what it is?" she whispered. *It's gold!*"

He glanced at it, and then at her suddenly pale face.

"Is it?" he said, calmly. "Yes, I suppose it is."

Stella's heart beat fast, and her eyes seemed fascinated by the piece of dully shining rock. Young as she was she was not too young to appreciate something of the tremendous importance of this discovery.

"Yes, it's gold; I'm certain of it!" she said. "See how soft this yellow stuff is. It's gold, gold, Rath! And, oh! see if there is any more of it."

He stirred the ground with his feet and picked up several nuggets of pure metal; then he went and got the pick, cleared some of the bush away, and dragged down the soil of the hill above the loose stones. It clattered down, breaking the silence in which the dead man had lain for so many years, and as Rath worked the gold shone amidst the rubble and sand.

Stella fell on her knees and collected some of the larger lumps and put them in her handkerchief.

"Yes, it's gold," she said in a whisper, and looking round as if she feared someone would hear them; but there was only the dead man behind them, and he had been long past hearing or caring for this discovery of *his* discovery. "There must be a fortune here—a *fortune!* Think of it, Rath! Is—is there any more, do you think?"

"Oh, yes," he answered, as calmly as before. "This is the bed of one of the streams that run down the hill; but the water got diverted by that big boulder up there falling in its path—do you see? I should say that there is gold where the stream ran, perhaps all over this hill."

"Oh, Rath! it's—it's like a dream! I've read about finding gold and gold-digging, but I never thought that I— Oh! look there—under the heap of stones you have brought down! There is a monster—a nugget they call it!"

He turned it over with his foot carelessly.

"You seem very delighted," he remarked, in his grave fashion. "What is the good of it?"

She stared up at him, her eyes shining with her pleasure in their mutual discovery, with that delight in gold which even an innocent girl must feel.

"What is the good of it!" she laughed. "Why, Rath, gold is money; and with money you can buy—oh, what can't you buy?" What, indeed, Stella? "You can buy anything! Why, half, a quarter of this would make us rich; and if there is more of it—as much as you think—we should be millionaires; we should have more money than we could count or spend!"

He shrugged his shoulders, still unimpressed.

"Gold is of no use here," he said. "You can not spend it. All the heap you have gathered, all that you could dig from the hill-side, would not be so useful as this pick."

"But you could exchange it with the Indians for anything you wanted. That would be the same as spending it. Don't you see?" she said, shrewdly.

"Yes; I suppose you could," he admitted. "Well, I'll take some of it, and try when next they come."

"No, no!" she said, quickly. "You mustn't do that, Rath; for then they'd know you'd found it, and the white men in the towns the Indians visit would know, and they would be sure to come here in search of it—come here in thousands! Oh! you don't know how mad people are to get gold! There is nothing they will not do for it."

"Really?"

"Yes, yes! I've read in books how a place that was as solitary and unknown as this is has in a few days been covered by men like—like ants."

He frowned, and looked impressed at last.

"Let us hide it," he said, gravely. "This island is mine—ours, and I should not like to have it overrun with men, as you say. Indeed, I don't want anyone else but ourselves."

He began to collect the pieces of quartz, and to cover with bracken and bush the spot he had cleared with the pick.

Stella had sunk on to a rock, and sat with her chin in her hands, her nuggets lying in her handkerchief on her lap.

Her brows were drawn straight, and met. She looked the personification of meditation.

"Rath, I suppose someone else besides ourselves knows of this—this gold?" she said in a whisper.

He considered for a moment or two.

"If what you say is true—that men will flock where the gold is—then who can know of it?" he said; "or they would be here, digging for it. The man whose bones are there must have been alone. Oh, yes! I see what happened! He was living here alone, just as my father and I were, or he came here from one of the towns—from Victoria, perhaps—hunting or fishing, and when he found the gold he remained, and the winter came upon him suddenly, and he was short of food and hadn't any proper clothing. He was too much afraid of other men coming to disturb him and share the gold, and so he perished of cold and hunger, and died here at his work. Men must be fond of this stuff to die for it!" he wound up, with scornful wonder.

Stella looked up.

"Men die for it every day; they will steal for it, commit any crime—even murder, Rath. If you have not money—gold—in England—and in the rest of the world, the towns and cities, you know, where people are—you are poor. And poverty is dreadful. I know. My mother and I were poor; and we were afraid of being poorer. It is *wicked* to be poor in England, and everybody avoids you as if—as if you were sick with an infectious disease. But if you are rich, everybody is glad and pleased and thinks much of you; for, don't you see? you have so much to give them! You live in a great house with plenty of servants, and you can give your friends good dinners, and have them stay with you; and you have horses and carriages for them to ride and drive in. Oh! it is hard to explain to you, who have never been anywhere, never seen anything!"

"Yes, it must be," he assented, quietly; "but I think I understand. Well, the gold is yours."

"Mine? Not mine, but yours, Rath!" she said, reproachfully.

"No," he said; "you found it, not I. Besides, it is of no use to me. I can't barter it with the Indians, for I don't want any other men here; and I can't make anything useful out of it. No; it is yours; and when a ship comes, and you go away, you can take the gold with you—there is a great quantity of it; and there must be that which the man got hidden away somewhere near. And when you get back to Eng-

land you will have enough to buy great houses and to keep horses and carriages, and you will be happy."

She had kept her eyes on his face while he spoke, looking straight before him with a slight frown, as if he were trying to picture her under the conditions he now described, and, as she listened, her face grew pale and her eyes fell. Then when he had finished, she rose and took her handkerchief by two corners and let the gold tumble out."

"You'll lose some of it if you don't take care," he said, stooping to recover the precious nuggets.

"You needn't trouble," she said, coolly; "I don't want it."

He stared up at her.

"Don't want it? And just now you said—"

"Oh! never mind what I said. It doesn't matter. I've changed my mind. Can't we get down without passing *that?*" She shuddered as she glanced towards the skeleton.

"Yes, there's a place." He pointed it out to her. "I'll dig a grave and bury the poor fellow."

She went down the hill, and presently he followed and overtook her. She was seated on a boulder, her head resting on her hand, her lovely eyes fixed dreamily on vacancy.

"Have you?" she asked in a whisper.

"Yes," he replied, solemnly; "and I've hid the gold. I dug a hole twenty paces—"

"I don't want to know, thanks! I don't care in the least where you put it," she interrupted him; and she jumped up and marched on in front, with her chin tilted and her long lashes covering her glorious eyes; and Rath, with the density of his sex, and ignorant of woman, wondered, as he followed, what he had said or done to offend her.

CHAPTER XI.

To be absolutely penniless—a fifth-rate actor "out of a shop" one day, and a peer of the United Kingdom with untold wealth the next!

Little wonder that Ralph Percival was almost beside himself with joy. It was so great a change that he could scarcely realise it, though he had had some days of suspense in which to prepare himself.

But all things considered, he behaved very well; much better, indeed, that Mr. Bulpit had expected.

"I expect he will lose his head and make a fool of himself," he had remarked, grimly, to Mr. Greyfold. "He will

want a regular flare-up, and a large party to see him enter Ratton."

"A brass band and flags, and arches with 'Welcome to Your Ancestral Home,'" said Greyfold, with a grin. "I'd better get something of the kind prepared."

But it appeared that this was exactly what the young man who had suddenly succeeded to an historic peerage did not want.

"I don't like a fuss," he said to Mr. Bulpit, glancing out of the corners of his eyes as if he were watching the effect of his words upon the old lawyer. "I don't want to march into my property as if—as if I were a circus entering a town. I'd rather take possession quietly; just as any other gentleman—nobleman—would do, who'd come into his own. I expect the newspapers are kicking up enough fuss as it is, aren't they?"

"No; I think not," said Mr. Bulpit, who was greatly surprised by this young man's wish to avoid a "flare-up." "Of course, there have been paragraphs and accounts, but nothing very obtrusive."

Lord Ratton drew a sigh of relief.

"As I said the other day, it isn't pleasant to have every one reminded that I was once down on my luck," he said. "In fact, I want to forget it myself—if I can; and if I went in for any fuss now, it would only remind people of what I was, and make them laugh."

"Mr. Greyfold was contemplating a band and some 'Welcome' arches," said Mr. Bulpit; and he was still more surprised by the angry flush which rose to the new earl's face, and the sharp way with which he broke in with:

"No, no; d—n it! I won't have it! I don't want every newspaper in the kingdom—I mean, I think it's better form to get things over quietly."

Mr. Bulpit nodded.

"I quite understand."

"Do you!" thought the earl, as he shot a quick sidelong glance at the dry little lawyer.

"And I'll stop Greyfold. But I think you'd better have some of the tenants; give them a dinner in a marquee, and that sort of thing; they will expect it. And, if I might suggest it, you could ask a few friends—I mean neighbours, they will be your friends presently—to dine with you on the occasion of your entering into possession."

Lord Ratton thought for a moment.

"Very well," he said. "You can give the tenants and people a feed on the lawn—if it's the regular thing and they

are looking for it—and I'd like to ask Lord Hatherley and—and Lady Mary to dinner."

"No one else?" asked Mr. Bulpit.

"No, no; not this time!" said his lordship, quickly. "When I get used—when I know more people—you see, I've met Lord Hatherley already."

Mr. Bulpit nodded. He was rather favourably impressed by this exhibition of shyness on the part of the new earl. A day was fixed for the dinner, and Lord Ratton wrote the invitation, dating it from the Bull, where he was still staying, while the Hall was being got ready for him.

Lord Hatherley received the letter at breakfast time, and tossed it across to Lady Mary.

"There's an invitation for you, my dear," he said. "Really, it's rather nice of him to ask us."

"Shall we go?" she asked, with her eyes still fixed on the note.

"Yes; why not?" he asked, with some surprise. "He is—or will be, on the 20th—our nearest neighbour, you know; and it would be awkward to refuse. Besides," he added, with an apologetic laugh, "I am devoured by curiosity to see how he will behave—get on. It is such an extraordinary position—such a change of life and prospects for the young man. It will be like reading a very interesting novel. What *are* you staring at that note for, my dear?" he broke off.

Lady Mary looked up with rather a startled air; then she laughed.

"I was looking at the handwriting and the phrasing of the letter," she said, throwing it back to him; there were no servants in the room. "It is a peculiar handwriting—the kind from which persons who profess to read character from handwriting, would, I should imagine, deduce all sorts of strange traits. And he has spelt one or two words wrongly."

"I don't think it's a bad note, considering his antecedents—or what I imagine them to have been," said her father. "Please let us go, Mary!"

She laughed as she looked at him with the loving tolerance of an only and much-petted child.

"You are as curious and interested as a woman, father," she said; "indeed, much more curious than one I could name. But we will go, by all means."

So Lord Hatherley wrote an acceptance; a pleasant little note, saying that he and Lady Mary would be delighted to be present at Lord Ratton's induction to his home; and the new

earl read and re-read this note as if it were something precious.

On the day fixed, the road from Market Ratton was in quite a lively condition; for, in addition to the tenants and labourers on the estate, Mr. Bulpit had induced the earl to invite some of the principal trades-people. A huge marquee had been erected on one of the lawns, and, despite his lordship's objection to any fuss, there *was* a brass band and some flags.

The earl drove over from the town in the afternoon, just in time to dress for dinner, and was received by Mr. Bulpit and Mr. Greyfold, and by the servants, drawn up in a double line, in the usual fashion. He was exceedingly pale, and the twist of the under-lip was very noticeable as he entered the hall, and, in reply to Mr. Bulpit's "Welcome, my lord!" he said, rather huskily:

"Thank you, thank you all very much!" Then, followed by his valet—engaged by Mr. Bulpit—he went up to his own rooms.

Half-way up the great stairs he paused and looked round the hall. With its size, its famous pictures, its figures in armour, stained glass, and ebony cabinets, it impressed him more than anything he had yet seen of his house; and Parkins, the valet, heard his master draw a long breath.

The dinner hour was eight, and Lord Hatherley and Mary arrived punctually, and were met in the hall by the new earl. That he was nervous was evident by his pallor and the twitch of his lips; but the man had been an actor, and after a few minutes on any stage, an actor, if he is worth his salt, loses his nervousness and finds his feet. And Lord Hatherley and Lady Mary did all they could to put him at his ease. Mr. Bulpit, who dined with them, was surprised at the speed with which the young man recovered his self-possession, and at the ease with which he played his part as host. It is true that, every now and then, sometimes in the middle of a sentence, the earl would pause, and, lowering his lids, glance round with a furtive and rather suspicious expression; but as the meal proceeded, this curious expression grew less frequent, and he seemed to gain confidence.

They were in the middle of the dessert, and the earl was talking, describing one of the lake districts to Lady Mary—he had gone there with a strolling company—when a cheer rose from outside and startled them.

"They want a speech," said Mr. Bulpit, with his rather grim smile.

"No, no!" said Lord Ratton. "I needn't make a speech, need I?" he asked of Lady Mary.

She smiled.

"I suppose it is usual on occasions such as this," she replied.

"Oh, well, if you think—" he said, with an emphasis on the "you;" and he rose. "But you will come with me? I feel awfully nervous."

They went out on to the terrace, and found that the crowd, which had been regaling itself in the marquee, had collected on the lawn just beneath the terrace and was cheering and yelling "Long life and happiness to the new earl!"

The "new earl" stepped forward to the balustrade and looked round.

He had been very careful at dinner, and had only drunk a couple of glasses of champagne; but his face was flushed and his heart beat quickly, for not until this moment had he realised his position. He was the Earl of Ratton; the land he looked on was his; all these people, in a sense, were *his!* His eyes flashed and his bosom swelled, and the hand that rested on the marble coping clenched tightly. He was the Earl of Ratton, the Earl of Ratton! A nobleman—and rich, rich!

He opened his lips, and, faltering for a moment only, said:

"My friends, thank you for your good wishes. It is very kind of you; all the kinder, considering that you know very little of me; but I hope we shall know more of one another soon, and that you will find me a good landlord and a considerate master. And again I thank you all—from my heart."

The crowd cheered, Lord Hatherley clapped his hands in genuine admiration of the speech; he had listened to many a worse one. The crowd cheered, every man of it, excepting one.

He was a small, undersized man, who bore a strong resemblance to the Mr. Workley who had been introduced to Mr. Bannister at the Columbine in Drury Lane. He did not cheer, but, with a short pipe stuck in the corner of his mouth, eyed the new earl curiously and with a cynical expression in his keen and bird-like eyes.

CHAPTER XII.

LORD RATTON did not notice amongst the crowd the little man who had been introduced to him at the Columbine; indeed, if he had seen him, he would, in this moment of excite-

ment, have failed to recognise him; and ten minutes afterwards Workley walked off with his brother-in-law, a bootmaker in Market Ratton, merely remarking to him:

"Lucky young beggar, that! Shouldn't wonder if he became popular. Rum world, this!" and his keen, bird-like eyes twinkled.

The earl watched the crowd streaming off to drink beer and dance in the marquee, with his heart swelling proudly, then he turned to receive the congratulations of his friends.

"A capital little speech; splendid!" said Lord Hatherley. "Just what was wanted! My dear Ratton, I prophesy that you will make your mark in the Lords."

"Very good, very suitable," said Mr. Bulpit, who was also pleased—and surprised.

But Ralph's eyes were fixed expectantly and anxiously on Lady Mary's face, and, feeling his gaze, she added her word of praise.

"I think you did it very well, Lord Ratton," she said, smilingly.

His face flushed with gratification.

"Do you?" he responded. "Then I'm satisfied. It's the first speech I ever made"—he ought to have added, "off the stage"—"and I was afraid that I should make a mess of it. But, then, you are all so kind, you see, that a fellow couldn't help doing his best. Shall we go back to the house?"

They went into the drawing-room—the magnificent room in which generations of stately Ratton ladies had held their social courts, and he would have had Lady Mary go to the piano and play; but Mary declined. She had been conscious all the evening that she was the only lady present, and she felt, if not embarrassed, rather shy; so they sat and talked; and, naturally enough, they talked of the young man's future.

Leaning against the mantel-piece of carved white marble, his eyes shining with suppressed excitement and delight in his newly found possessions and position, Ralph expressed himself very well, with that specious kind of candour and mock humility which imposes upon so many persons, which impressed the honest, simple-minded Hatherley at any rate.

"Of course I want to do my duty," said Ralph. "I want to do the right thing by—by the title and the place. The difficulty is that I don't know my part—er—I mean, what my duty is. You see, I haven't had the advantage of being brought up to the—the business; and the life is all new to me."

"Judging by the admirable way in which you played your

part this evening, I should say you will not find very great difficulty, Ratton," remarked Lord Hatherley, beamingly.

"Well, I mean to do my best; and I think I shall get through very well, if you will be kind enough to help me. It's very kind of you to be here to-night, very kind, and I can't tell you how thankful I am." He glanced at Lady Mary, who sat with her hands folded on her lap, her eyes downcast, trying at that very moment to think the best of this modest young man, and half angry with herself because, somehow or other, she could not. "I should have felt fearfully lonely and—and out of it, if you hadn't come to my aid; and I'm hoping, Lord Hatherley"—for the life of him he could not omit the "lord," and he wondered if he ever should be able to do so. How easily Lord Hatherley addressed him as "Ratton"—"that you will give me your advice, you and Mr. Bulpit, who has proved such a good friend—"

Mr. Bulpit bowed and blew his nose in a grim kind of way.

"Of course, I know there is an immense amount of responsibility attaching to my—er—position, and I don't want to shirk it."

"Of course not—of course not," murmured Lord Hatherley, with a nod of approval at the others.

"I should like to do something for my—er—people—the people on the estate." He glanced at Mary, whose downcast eyes rather discouraged him. "There must be some improvements to be made in the cottages and—er—schools, and that kind of thing—" He paused, as he tried to recollect some passages in some of the novels he had read, some of the "benevolent squire" business. "Perhaps the church wants rebuilding?"

Lord Hatherley laughed.

"The church is all right, Ratton," he said, "but we want some new schools, and some of the cottages might be rebuilt; but," he added, gravely, "I am poaching on Mr. Greyfold's preserves. He'll know what wants doing. And I daresay Mary will not object to joining the committee; she is always making attacks on my purse for similar reforms."

Lady Mary glanced up quickly and almost reproachfully at her father, but she said nothing.

"If Lady Mary would be so very good and kind," murmured Ralph, with fervent gratitude. "And I should like to encourage—er—sport. I suppose there is something I could do in that direction?"

"Certainly—certainly," assented Hatherley; "there is the

cricket club and the hounds," he added, eagerly. "By the way, you ride, of course?"

Ralph coloured and looked down.

"Er—not very well, I'm afraid," he said. "I have not had many opportunities. But, of course, I am fond of horses, and I—er—know a little about them." How often he had, hidden behind a bush, watched the horses making their secret trials on the Heath. "And I shall hunt."

"Of course—of course," said Lord Hatherley, a little less enthusiastically, for "I'm fond of horses," didn't sound very hopeful; a sportsman would have felt that such an assertion was superfluous. "Oh, rest assured that we shall find plenty for you to do. There's the cricket club, as I said—you play, of course?"

"I haven't played for years," said Ralph; which was true, as he had never had a bat or ball in his hand. "I shall be happy to subscribe."

"Ah, well, you will soon pick it up again; and the subscription will carry you on until you do," laughed Lord Hatherley. "But you need not fear you will want occupation, my dear Ratton. You will have the whole county down upon you presently, and you'll be busy enough receiving and returning calls. I hope you mean to stay here—at the Hall—for a time at any rate?"

"Certainly!" said Ralph, emphatically.

"Quite so; well, you will be entertained and have to entertain, you know. It will be rather hard work for a bachelor; but you must make haste and present us with a lady chatelaine."

The earl dropped his eyes, and the smile fled from his face for a moment as he laughed uneasily. It was a strange and untactful remark for a man with a charming and marriageable daughter seated beside him; but Lord Hatherley made it in perfect innocence. In his eyes his beloved Mary was a child still, and he would have regarded as an enemy any man who proposed to rob him of her. Mr. Bulpit knew this; but Ralph glanced at Lady Mary out of the corners of his eyes.

"Perhaps I may, some day," he said. "In the meantime, I shall hope you will come to my assistance and help a poor bachelor over his trying duties."

"Delighted!" said Lord Hatherley. "Not that I think you will need much assistance. You will find us not at all difficult people to get on with, eh, Bulpit? And we shall all be very glad to welcome you amongst us."

Lady Mary rose.

"I think we should be going, father," she said, quietly.

Ralph saw that, for some reason, she did not share her father's enthusiasm, and he was too clever to press them to remain. He went with them to their carriage, standing beside it with a grateful smile on his handsome face as he murmured again and again his thanks for their kindness.

"Well, I am agreeably surprised!" exclaimed Lord Hatherley, as they drove off. "From what I know of poor Ralph Percival, I certainly did not expect his son to turn out so good a specimen. A really nice, manly young fellow! And so modest and unassuming! That was a capital speech of his, wasn't it?"

"Very," said Mary, quietly.

"And we must help him, Molly, eh? Really, one can't help sympathising with him in his novel and rather trying position. To come amongst us, quite a stranger, and with not the best of antecedents—trying, very trying; and I think he plays his part very well; don't you?"

"Yes, indeed," she responded, and truthfully; for she had a vague suspicion that the new earl had indeed been "playing a part."

Lord Hatherley looked at her with a kind of perplexity and doubt.

"I've got an idea that you don't—well, quite like the young man," he said.

She was silent for a moment, then she said:

"I neither like nor dislike Lord Ratton, father. You forget that I've seen so very little of him."

"You have seen as much of him as I have, dear," he said. "But there! I think I understand how it is. You see, I expected to find him so very different that I am agreeably surprised."

"And swing to the other extreme," she said, with the swift, sweet smile which was reserved for him alone. "Dear, you must not expect me to feel as you feel towards him. I neither expected nor feared, and I must decline to fall down and worship the new Earl of Ratton."

Her father laughed.

"I can't imagine you falling down and worshipping anyone, Molly mine," he said.

Soon after the Hatherleys had gone, Mr. Bulpit took his departure, and the earl very graciously accompanied him to the hall door. He was very gracious indeed to the old lawyer, and shook hands with him with a mixture of condescension and familiarity which amused that gentleman.

"I'm very much obliged to you, Bulpit," said the earl, omitting the "Mr." where, of course, he ought to have used it. "You have done the right thing by me, and, by George! I thank you for it, as you'll find. You and Mr. Greyfold won't find me difficult to get on with—eh, Greyfold?" and he as graciously shook hands with the steward.

"Well?" said Mr. Greyfold, interrogatively, as they climbed into Mr. Bulpit's modest phaeton. "What do you think of him?"

Mr. Bulpit was silent for a moment or two, then he said:

"I don't fancy he is quite such a fool as I once thought him."

"Did you notice how cleverly he—well, played Lord Hatherley—and Lady Mary?" asked Greyfold.

"We'll leave Lady Mary out of the discussion, if you please, Greyfold," said the old lawyer, stiffly. "Yes, I noticed that Lord Hatherley was very favourably impressed by the young man." And then he shut his lips close, and Mr. Greyfold knew that his old friend would say no more.

After his guests had gone, Ralph stood on the terrace listening to the band which was playing merrily for the dancers in the marquee. His heart was beating fast, the blood was coursing through his veins. He was trying to realise that he was indeed and in very truth a peer, the Earl of Ratton; owner of Ratton Hall—thousands of acres—and untold wealth. Only the other day—how many days ago was it?—he had been a fifth-rate actor out of an engagement, and now he was a peer of the realm, with wealth and power at his command! It seemed incredible, a wild and fantastic dream! He paced up and down the hall, his hands gripping each other behind his back, his heart beating thickly, chokingly. Then by degrees he grew calm, and, as he went over the incidents of the evening, he thought of Lady Mary. How beautiful she was! How lovely! She was just like the exquisite women he had read of in novels and plays, but had never even ventured to hope to see. And this exquisite, adorable creature was a neighbour, a friend of his—an equal! Think of it! He was no longer a fifth-rate actor, but the possessor of an historic title and untold wealth. An equal! And this perfect creature, more beautiful and lovable than anything he had ever dreamed of, might be his—if he were free! He ground his teeth as he thought of the squalid room in the street off Waterloo Bridge Road, of Nita, the ballet-girl, his wife. If only he were free! This wife of his was the fly in the amber. There is always the fly in the amber, oh, my brothers! Some-

times it is a wife, sometimes it is a mental or physical defect. I know a millionaire who is a helpless cripple, and who would willingly barter his millions for a pair of sound legs—there is always this fly in the amber; and Nita, the girl he had married when he was worse than a nobody, spoiled Lord Ratton's perfect happiness to-night.

The strains of the band in the marquee broke in upon his reflections, and, half unconsciously, he took his bowler hat from the stand in the hall and sauntered towards the tent.

By this time, beer and tobacco, the local band, and the dancing, had excited the simple folk to whom such an outing as this was rare indeed; and Ralph, as he entered the tent, was for a moment unrecognised; then, as they who were near the entrance saw him and recognised him, a whisper, a murmur ran round: "The earl! Lord Ratton!"

The dancers hesitated and paused, the music faltered, a voice cried:

"A speech! a speech! his lordship!"

But Ralph had had enough speechifying for that night, and, with a wave of the hand, he signed to the band to continue playing, and looking round, saw a dark-haired girl standing near him. Without a word he put his arm round her waist and began the dance with her.

If the action had been premeditated, he could not have done anything more likely to make him popular. It caught the crowd at its—and his—most favourable moment; and that sound which is more significant than a cheer rose in the heated marquee. Ralph danced well; it was part of his education as a strolling player, and he and the girl out-danced the other dancers, to the delight of the party; and a loud cheer arose as, the band stopping for want of breath, Ralph and his partner ceased in the middle of the floor with every eye upon them.

"You waltz very well," he said. "What is your name? You know I know nobody here by name."

"Mabel Bray, my lord," the girl replied, panting a little.

"Mabel Bray. I shall not forget it," said Ralph, graciously. "Shall we dance this next one? What is it—a mazurka. I don't know it. You must teach me, please."

He danced it with her, and remained, choosing partners at hap-hazard, for an hour or two; and every hour his popularity increased. At last, they said to one another, a Ratton had come who was worthy of the name; and as Ralph left the marquee a deafening cheer rose in his honour.

By his condnct that night in the marquee the new Earl of Ratton had won the hearts of his tenants and labourers, and

the Ratton trades-people; but the hearts of his neighbours and equals, the county people among whom he would have to move and live, had yet to be won.

County families are exclusive and particular. They knew very little—most of them nothing—of this new Earl of Ratton, and they—well, waited.

But Lord Hatherley came forward, as a god out of the machine, and invited the county to meet the new earl at dinner, at Hatherley Court.

"We must stand by him, Molly," he said to Lady Mary. "It is the least we can do. We know more of him than anyone else does, and I think you will agree with me that what we know is favourable to him. We'll introduce him."

So Lord Hatherley called what may be described as a gathering of the clans, at which the new Earl of Ratton was to be made known to his neighbours and fellow-countymen; and, so curious were they, scarcely a refusal was sent the invitation.

It was indeed a great gathering. No one who does not know the country lord and squire can appreciate the significance of such a function as that which was held at Hatherley Manor. There were the Earl and Countess of Downshire; the Dowager Duchess of Lathrom, with the young duke and duchess; Viscount Parodel; Sir Gilbert and Lady Bryan—in a word, the county was fully represented.

Ralph the earl was rather nervous as he dressed for this great party. He knew that it was to be his initiation to the society in which he was now to take a leading part; and he knew that some of those who would be present would not be lenient in their criticism, as was the good-natured Lord Hatherley. He would be the mark of every curious eye fixed upon him with the scrutiny which the county aristocrat bestows upon all claimants to social position. They would mark how he dressed and moved and talked and spoke; even his manner of eating and drinking would not escape their attention; and like most men who have risen from "the pavement," as the French say, to an exalted position, he was painfully, morbidly conscious of the difference between his upbringing and manners and those of the men and women with whom, by right of birth, he should be on an equality.

But he had been an actor, and he concealed his nervousness from Parkins, his valet, fairly well. Only once did he give himself away, and that was when, in a moment of extreme depression, as he reflected upon the ordeal before him, he said in a would-be casual way:

"In this part of the country do you give your right or left

arm to the lady, Parkins? It's not of much consequence, of course, but the custom varies in different countries."

Parkins, who was a perfect-mannered youth, did not permit his respectful gravity to relax for a single instant as he replied:

"The right, my lord."

Ralph's heart sank; for he remembered that he had given Lady Mary his left on the occasion of the dinner the other night; and Parkins, who was as acute as he was well-mannered, added, with quiet respect:

"But I've seen gentlemen offer the left, my lord. Lord Forfield always used to do so; his lordship was absent-minded."

Ralph nodded and drew a breath of relief.

"And—er—it is usual here to remain standing at the table till the ladies have taken their places, I suppose, Parkins?"

"Yes, my lord; it is generally done."

"Ah, yes; thanks. I've spent so much of my time—er—abroad, that I've forgotten."

"Quite so, my lord; very natural," said the discreet valet. "You will have your lavender gloves, my lord?"

"Yes—yes—thanks. Now, shall I put them on? It's—it's warm."

With undisturbed gravity and respect, Parkins gave the required tip.

"It is warm, my lord. Too warm to wear them; and no doubt your lordship will carry them in your hand."

"Yes, I shall. Is the brougham ready?"

Parkins knew that to drive, especially in a brougham, would be a mistake.

"The brougham, my lord?" he said, almost reverentially. "I am sorry; I did not order it, thinking your lordship would prefer to walk—so short a distance."

"Ah, yes; I think I will walk," said Ralph, languidly, as if the matter were of no consequence. "By the way, I sha'n't wear that morning-suit again—the dark one—and you can have it."

"Thank you very much, my lord," said Parkins, gratefully, and congratulating himself upon having got an exceedingly warm berth.

Ralph fought hard with his nervousness as he walked across the park to the Manor. After all, he was as good as, in many instances, better, than most of the people who were going to stare at and criticise him. What had he to fear?

But he was rather pale, and his eyelids drooped as he was announced and he entered the crowded room.

He knew by the semi-silence, the pause in the conversation, as he entered, that they had been talking about him; but in reality there was no cause for his suspicion and fear. They were men and women of birth and breeding, and had not been discussing him ill-naturedly; indeed, they had been listening to Lord Hatherley's favourable, almost enthusiastic, description of the new earl.

"You can't help liking him," Lord Hatherley had been saying; "especially when you remember that he must have had a rough time of it, and that he has to fight against a natural prejudice. *I* think he will be a great acquisition—Oh, here he is!" And he went forward to meet him with an encouraging smile and a "How do you do, Ratton! Looking for Mary? She's over there amongst that group of ladies. Let me introduce you to your neighbours."

Ralph went up to greet his hostess, and Lord Hatherley made the introductions in his pleasant and genial way; and the new earl found himself plunged into the ordeal.

He drew a long breath of relief after a moment or two; for he found that the ordeal was not so terrible as he had expected. They all seemed ready to be friendly; and Lady Mary herself, though grave and cold, was gentle in her reserve, as became the daughter of the house and hostess.

He was relieved of the intensest part of the strain, but he was extremely careful, contenting himself with speaking little, and almost limiting himself to answering the usual questions; and his apparently modest demeanour made a favourable impression.

"He is really quite good-looking," remarked the dowager duchess as he left her side. "But then he is a Ratton, you see! I wonder whether there ever was a family in which the members were all so favoured in the matter of looks? This young man reminds me of his uncle, the last earl—poor fellow!"

Ralph was nearly the last to arrive, but just before the dinner hour a young man entered whom the butler announced as Mr. Edward Bryan. He was a handsome young fellow, with bright eyes and fair, crisp hair, which, though it was cut to the usual shortness, broke in small waves on his forehead and temple. His eyes were not only bright, but extremely pleasant ones, and they wandered over the brilliant company in an eager search. Presently they rested on Lady Mary, and with a smile which made his face good to look upon, he made straight for her as if there were no one else in the room.

"How do you do, Lady Mary?" he said in a clear, eager

voice. She was talking to Lady Bryan and one or two other ladies, and she started at the sound of his voice, and regarded him with a mixture of pleasure and surprise, as if she were rather startled.

"Edward!" she exclaimed; then she became rosy red and laughed shyly, and just a little nervously. "I didn't know—"

"Why, Edward, when did you come back?" exclaimed Lady Bryan.

"Just now, mother," he said. "May I kiss her, Lady Mary? It's bad form, I know; but I haven't seen her for so long!"

He put his arm round his mother and kissed her, and did it so naturally and unaffectedly that the spectators smiled with sympathy.

"But—but you were not coming until to-morrow!" said Lady Bryan.

"The vessel arrived six hours before we expected her to do so," he explained, "and I came on at once."

"But—Edward, my dear—"

"Yes, I know, mother! I have no right to be here; but when I found that you had come to dinner at the Manor, I thought I would venture to follow you. I'd just time to dress, and none to send for an invitation. Of course, I know I am an intruder, and it's just possible that Lord Hatherley will have me chucked out—I beg your pardon, Lady Mary; I do, indeed—but I thought I'd risk it. How do you do, Lord Hatherley? May I stay, or shall I go away again? Please forgive me and let me stay!"

Lord Hatherley laughed as he shook the young man by the hand.

"I'll forgive you, my dear boy," he said. "But neither Mary nor I would have done so, if you hadn't come; eh, Mary?"

The colour was still trying to fight its way into Mary's cheeks, and her eyes were rather downcast as she smiled an assent; she could forgive this frank, bright-eyed young man for coming uninvited, but she found it hard to forgive herself for the terrible blunder of calling him by his Christian name.

As if he understood her embarrassment, he turned to greet those near him; and presently Lord Hatherley caught him by the shoulder, and said:

"Edward, you don't know Lord Ratton yet."

Edward swung round in his alert fashion, the graceful and easy facility of the man whose every muscle had been well

trained, and he and the earl faced each other. The bright eyes scanned Ralph's face for an instant, as if their owner were ready and willing to make friends; but something in the dark, almost black eyes of Ralph the earl quelled the amiable inclination; and, with a certain restraint, which pained him, he held out his hand, and said:

"I was told I should meet Lord Ratton here, sir; I am very glad."

"And I am very glad to meet any friend of Lord Hatherley," said Ralph.

Both men spoke pleasantly, but the contrast between their voices was remarkable. Edward Bryan's was clear and frank, and naturally melodious; Ralph the earl's was artificial, and marred by that peculiar tone which belongs to the voice of the self-conscious man who is always keeping a watch upon himself, always on guard.

While the two young men were looking at each other with that strange premonition of dislike which is as inexplicable as it is instinctive, the butler announced dinner.

The young duke took Mary in, but Ralph found himself near her; and though he knew that he should devote himself to the lady beside him, he watched Lady Mary out of the corners of his eyes; and he noticed that a subtle change had come over her. Hitherto, he had only seen her reserved—always gentle and sweet—but certainly reserved and rather cold, at any rate, towards himself; but to-night the colour came and went in her lovely face, her eyes shone with a light which he had never seen in them before, a brightness which added to her loveliness; though she performed her part of hostess with infinite grace and ease, there was a little flutter in her voice, and her smile came and went like gleams of sunshine in an April sky. Looking round furtively, as he answered the questions of Lady Downshire, he asked himself what was the cause of this change; and suddenly he caught a glance which, perhaps unconsciously, Mary gave to the bright-faced Edward Bryan, saw Bryan's glance meet hers, and hers withdrawn quickly. Ralph's face, as he watched them covertly, grew dark, and the ugly twist came to his nether lip. Who was this young fellow—a mere nobody, a son of a mere baronet—whose presence had power to work so great a change in Lady Mary's mood and manner?

"Mr. Bryan—the gentleman opposite—seems to have only just arrived from somewhere," he said to Lady Downshire. "Do you know him?"

Lady Downshire stared at him; then apologised, with a smile, for her surprise.

"Oh, I beg your pardon; of course, you—well, *you* have only just arrived, so to speak, haven't you?" she said, with the frankness for which her ladyship was famous, "or you'd know him. Edward Bryan is Sir Gilbert's second son—poor boy!"

"Why is he 'poor boy'?" asked Ralph, glancing under his half-lowered lids at the young man who was talking and laughing light-heartedly with the lady on his left, and, indeed, with all near him.

"Well, he's the *second* son, d'ye see?" explained Lady Downshire. "The first, of course, will come into the estate, and beyond the estate the poor Bryans have nothing. Oh, it's no secret, Lord Ratton. Indeed, you will find that all our circumstances and financial conditions are as well known as—as the age of the queen. Being the second son, and without prospects, Edward has had to go out and fight the world. He has been to the colonies; though which colony and what he has been doing I don't know. What *do* our boys do in the colonies, Lord Ratton?"

"Break stone, mend roads, drive milk carts, and live like —like common labourers, I believe," said Ralph, with a covert sneer, as he looked across the table at the splendid young fellow.

"Really?" said the countess, also looking at Edward Bryan. "Well, it doesn't seem to hurt them. At any rate, it hasn't hurt him. He may have lived like a common labourer, but he has also lived like a gentleman, I'm sure. Don't you think so?"

"Yes, certainly," assented Ralph, hastily, and with a spasm of hate for the outspoken great lady, who turned away from him and addressed her neighbour on her left.

All through the dinner Edward Bryan talked and laughed with the ease of the well-bred youth who is at home with his company, and Ralph watched him with envy and the unwilling admiration which cometh before hate. He himself spoke but little until the ladies had gone; then a couple of glasses of the Hatherley port and some encouragement from Lord Hatherley broke down his guard, so to speak, and he let himself go a little. The men had moved up towards Lord Hatherley's end of the table, and Edward Bryan, as if to atone for his coolness at their introduction, took a chair next Ralph and got into conversation with him.

"I'm home for only a short time, Lord Ratton," he said;

"but I hope we shall see something of each other. Of course, you will be over at my governor's pretty often. I hope you like the county? It's not as good as Leicestershire; but you'll find some decent runs. The pack's a good one; and the shooting—but you know that the Ratton covers are of the best."

"I—I don't shoot," said Ralph; "and I'm not much of a horseman. In fact, I've not had much practice, and I'm not sure that there is anything suitable in my stables—"

"Look here: come over to-morrow to the Court—our place, you know—and try a gee we've got there, will you?" said Edward Bryan, in the friendliest way. "My governor goes in for breeding, you know, and we've always got one or two decent animals in the stables—at least we *had*," he corrected himself, with a smile. "I've been away for four years, you know—or perhaps you don't know—and I'm not sure what there is at home; but, anyway, will you come over after breakfast to-morrow, and try what we've got?"

"Thank you; but I don't know that I want to buy—" began Ralph, with an affected drawl; but he was stopped by the sheer amazement which spoke from every line of Edward Bryan's frank face.

"My dear Lord Ratton, I wasn't thinking of *selling* you a horse!" he said, laughingly; and Ralph, a fiery red, bit his lip and tried to redeem his awful mistake.

"No, no; of course! Yes, thank you; I shall be very pleased," he muttered.

"All right; about eleven," said Bryan, pleasantly; then he turned to one of the other men; but presently, with a murmured apology, he rose and left the room.

As he entered the drawing-room, his mother looked up at him fondly, but demanded, with mock severity:

"What are you doing here, Edward?"

"Oh, they are talking politics, mother, and, as you know, I am a Radical, a kind of Daniel in the lions' den of Tories. It's a terrible thing to see a father and son fighting at a friend's table, so I begged leave to come here—out of harm's way."

Lady Bryan looked after him lovingly as he went straight across the room to Mary.

"His father and he never had a cross word since he was born," said the fond mother to the young duchess, who knew that the baronet and his eldest son were always quarrelling.

He went straight for Lady Mary, and drew a chair up beside hers.

"Where are the others, Mr. Bryan?" she asked, trying to speak in a matter-of-fact tone; but "her eyes fled from him," as Emerson so happily says, and the colour rose to her face.

"Oh, they're coming presently. I wanted to hear you say that you were glad to see me, *Lady* Mary," he said, laying an emphasis on the "Lady." "You haven't said so yet, you know."

"Of course I'm glad," she said, with a smile that flickered a little.

"I'm glad it's 'of course,'" he said in a low voice. "It's so long since I left, that I didn't know— You have changed so, Mary—I beg your pardon, *Lady* Mary! It's so difficult to remember that you have grown up, and that it mustn't any longer be 'Mary.' How have you managed it?"

"Managed what?" she asked, trying to meet the ardent gaze of his bright, eager eyes, and failing.

"To grow so tall, and so—I can't help it; don't be offended—so beautiful."

"Thank you. Was I so ugly as a little girl, Mr. Bryan?"

"Not ugly; that you never were; but when I left you were all—all legs and wings," he said, with the candour which women like—if only men would believe it!—"just a—a school-girl who wasn't ashamed to play with a rough schoolboy; and now you are a 'booful lady,' of whom I'm more than half afraid."

"Yes, you appear to be," said Mary, with a half-shy, half-laughing glance at his handsome face. "But never mind paying me compliments. You have changed too—"

"Have I? How sweet of you to say that!"

—"I didn't say for the better," she put in, demurely.

"Oh! it must be for the better!" he said, laughing at her thrust, and not wincing as a vain young man would have done.

"You also are older, and you've grown—so much that you—you startled me when you came in," she said, more gravely, and in a low voice. "But I want to hear what you've been doing. You went away to make your fortune, you know."

"Yes," he said, gravely enough now. "It's a difficult thing to manufacture, Mary—*Lady* Mary—and I haven't succeeded; in fact, I'm a failure," he avowed, frankly, but with a sigh.

The beautiful eyes were full of sweet sympathy as they rested on him.

"Tell me," she said in a low voice.

He raised his head and laughed ruefully.

"Oh, it's soon told," he said. "I've been out in Florida trying to grow oranges. Mary, never look upon the orange with scorn, or even indifference; for a fruit that nearly breaks a man's heart in the growing is worthy of respect. I lost all my money—my poor little capital the poor governor had scraped together—in Florida, and I've just earned my living in any way that presented itself. I've been odd man and driver in a livery stable; outdoor help on a farm; I've broken stones at two-and-six, and packed oranges at five shillings a day. In fact, I'm a Prodigal Son in everything but the riotous living, for I've had nothing to riot on."

"I'm sorry," she murmured, her eyes suspiciously downcast.

He laughed.

"Don't you waste your sweet pity on me, Lady Mary," he said. "Hard work's not a bad thing for a fellow, and it won't hurt me."

"No, I'm sure it won't," she said, glancing at him with—ah, with only half-hidden admiration in her lovely eyes.

"No, not the hard work, or the roughing it, but the disappointment." He paused. "Mary"—how sweet his voice now was in her ears only a woman can know—"you know why I went out, why I wanted to make money? You know! No, I can't say it. Not yet. I've no right to. But, Mary, all the time I've been away one thought, one hope has kept me going. There I am again. And I'd vowed to myself all the way home that I would not say a word. But, Mary, that thought, that hope still keeps me going. I'm off again presently. I've saved some money, and I'm going out again. I mean to make that fortune—yes, I've got to, and I shall do it! Do you know why? Shall I tell you? No; I dare not; I must not. I'm not so mean. Fancy the Prodigal Son coming home and telling the loveliest, sweetest, queenliest—Oh, here they all come! Mary, what do you think of Lord Ratton?" he asked, breaking off, and speaking quickly and in a lower voice. They exchanged glances, and he was answered.

"Nor I. But it isn't fair. Poor chap, he too has had to rough it, I hear. I've asked him to come over to-morrow. Oh, look! some of them are going already—and I seem only to have had a minute, one minute with you. Never mind; if I never have another, it was worth coming from the other end of the world for. There I am again. Forgive me. Yes,

duchess, it was very hot in Florida. Crocodiles, alligators, and all sorts of nasty things. Am I glad to get back to stupid old England? Oh, am I not! Don't ask me if you don't want me to weep aloud!"

He rattled on, covering Mary's retreat; but Ralph the earl had seen the two talking—whispering together, as it seemed to him—and as he went back to the Hall that night his face was dark and his temper savage, notwithstanding the fact that his introduction to the county had been a distinct success.

He had played his part very well; but the mask came off as he sat alone in the smoking-room at the Hall and drank glass after glass of whiskey and smoked cigar after cigar; and as he went, rather unsteadily, up the stairs, he muttered:

"I am the earl and he's nobody. I'd beat him, if I were only free—only free!"

The next day he went over to the Court. Parkins dressed him in a riding-suit correct to a button, and the new Earl of Ratton *looked* the complete horseman. The Bryans gave him a pleasant, homely welcome, and Edward—clad in a well-worn suit of tweeds—led Ralph to the stables.

"Now, if there is anything you fancy—" he said.

Ralph looked down the stalls.

"That's not a bad nag," he said, patronisingly, and nodding at a bright chestnut.

"All right," rejoined Edward; "we'll have him saddled. He's quiet."

"Oh, I'm not afraid," drawled Ralph.

"Why, of course not; but you said you were a little out of practice. But come along. I'll ride this old chap; he's steady, and won't upset your gee."

The horses were saddled, and Edward flung his leg over his. Ralph mounted cautiously, and they rode out of the stable-yard and into the Court avenue.

"Stirrups right?" asked Edward, who had seen in an instant that his man was a novice.

"Quite; thanks," replied Ralph, with the curtness of the nervous man.

"Well, then, we'll go quietly at first," said Edward. "Keep him on the road. I don't think I'd pull at him quite so much; he's rather ticklish about the mouth. That's right."

He chatted pleasantly as they rode along; but Ralph the earl found it difficult to talk, for his heart was very near his mouth. Something within him whispered that he would come to grief, and the something was quite right; for, as

they reached the cross-roads, a donkey cart came lumbering towards them from Market Ratton. Ralph's horse started and shied slightly, and even as Bryan called out, "Don't pull at him!" Ralph jerked hard on the bit, the horse rose, and—

"Hope you're not hurt?" said Edward, anxiously, as he dismounted and stood beside his companion who, minus his hat, stood, white-faced and sullen, brushing the dust from his clothes with a shaky hand.

"No, I'm not hurt, thanks. The brute reared so suddenly. Where is it?"

Edward laughed. It never occurred to him that a man would take a quiet tumble to heart.

"Oh, he's half back to his stable! Mount mine, won't you? It's as quiet as a sheep."

But, to his amazement Ralph glanced at him with barely concealed fury; and without a word marched off in the direction of the Hall.

"Hi, Ratton!" Bryan called, and was on the point of riding after him; but feeling that his lordship would prefer to be left alone, turned and rode back to the Court; he would go after him to the Hall presently.

Ralph strode on, his face white, his eyes glowing with sullen rage.

"Curse him!" he ground out between his clenched teeth. "He planned it; it was a plan. He'll tell the whole county. They'll laugh and call me a coward—*me*, the Earl of Ratton! Curse him!"

He shook with the fright the fall had given him and his rage, and he stopped after a few yards; and leaning against the broken fence of a gravel pit, wiped the sweat from his face.

Last night he had, as he told himself, scored, had made a favourable impression; but now— He could hear the duke, Lord Parodel, all of them, laughing as that "young beast," Edward Bryan, told how the "new Earl of Ratton" had tumbled off his horse.

"A coward, that's what they'll brand me!" he muttered, with an oath, as he glared moodily into the gravel pit.

Then, suddenly, he looked up, for he heard the sound of wheels, and saw a dog-cart coming down the hill behind him. It was a tall cart with a big horse. It seemed to him to be coming at a tremendous speed. There was only one person in the cart; and, as it came nearer, he saw that the person was Lady Mary. She was driving, leaning back as if she

were straining on the reins. He ran forward to the road, his heart beating fast, and in another instant learnt the truth. The big horse had bolted, was making straight for the gravel pit, and Lady Mary was alone and incapable of checking the animal.

There are moments when the coward ceases to be one. This is a fact which no psychologist can explain; it has been exemplified on every battle-field, on every race-course, on all sorts of occasions. It was instanced this morning in the conduct of Ralph, Earl of Ratton. As the horse, mad with fright or temper came down towards him, something rose within the man's shaken frame which impelled him to a deed which should belong exclusively to the brave and heroic. It was not courage; it was an impulse born of the desire to wipe out the craven tumble from Bryan's horse.

"Coward, am I!" he said to himself, with an oath. "I'll show them!"

As the tearing horse came nearer and nearer, Ralph pulled himself together, and at the very critical moment sprang into the road and flung himself at its head. He managed to grip the reins near the bit, to get hold of the bit itself—how, he knew not—and scarcely conscious of Lady Mary's pale and resolutely set face, he threw all his weight against the animal. He felt himself dragged in the dust for yards, felt the foam from the animal's mouth flicking across his face and eyes, almost felt the wheels touching him; then, with a sense of half-hysterical triumph, he knew that the horse's progress had been arrested.

Half dazed, and still clinging to the bit, he heard Lady Mary cry, breathlessly:

"Oh, let go—let go! please—please! He has stopped! You will be hurt! Lord Ratton, you—you have saved me!"

From what, she did not say; but, half unconscious, he glanced to the right, and saw the broken fence of the gravel pit within a few yards of them.

CHAPTER XIII.

RALPH, still unconsciously holding on to the reins, looked up at Lady Mary in a dazed fashion. His face was white and smeared with dust and blood—for the bit or a stone had scratched it—his coat-sleeve was torn, and his collar unfastened, and he was breathing heavily. But for all his dishevelled appearance, he seemed a hero in the girl's sight. *How could he seem* otherwise?

"Oh, I am afraid you are hurt!" she said, anxiously. "He dragged you some distance. Are you sure you have not broken your arm? There is blood on your face."

He wiped his face with his pocket-handkerchief, and smiled up at her. Just for that moment the man felt a hero.

"I'm not hurt—at least, I don't think so," he said. "Don't be frightened."

Mary was not frightened now; it is a question if she had been frightened for any one moment of the affair; but she was anxious about him; and as she looked at the gravel pit, from which the rotten and broken rail would certainly not have saved her, her beautiful eyes filled with tears of gratitude.

"I am not frightened, excepting on your account, Lord Ratton," she said, trying to suppress her agitation. "Oh, what am I to say to you? You have certainly saved my life, and at the risk of your own. It was the bravest, the noblest thing to do. You might have been crushed under his hoofs, or under the wheel, or dragged with us into the gravel pit."

Ralph tried not to shudder at the terrible picture, and forced a would-be easeful smile. He felt as if he were playing the leading part in a popular melodrama, and unconsciously drew himself up into the appropriate attitude. He would have taken off his hat, but that was in the road at some distance.

"Don't mention it," he said, fatuously, as if she had thanked him for opening a gate. "How did it happen? Did something frighten it?"

"I scarcely know," she said, confusedly. "I was going into Market Ratton, shopping, and on the top of the hill a little basket I take with me dropped out of the cart. The groom got down to pick it up, and just at that moment the horse started. I think something must have stung it. It is a new horse—I have only driven it two or three times—but it has always been quite quiet; and I am used to horses; I have ridden and driven since I was a child."

At this moment the groom came up panting, accompanied by a couple of farm hands who had witnessed the bolt and the heroic rescue.

"I will go home," she said. "The horse is quite quiet now—see how frightened he is, poor fellow!—but my father would be sure to hear of the accident, and be alarmed. And you will come with me, will you not, Lord Ratton? I am not quite sure that you are unhurt."

"I assure you I am all right," he said, as casually as he could. "It is very fortunate that I—I happened to be pass-

ing at the time." As he spoke, the impulse, the lucky impulse to tell the story of his fall, occurred to him, and he obeyed it. "The fact is, I have just met with an accident—only a small one of no consequence. I was riding a horse Mr. Edward Bryan had kindly lent me to try. It reared; and I—came off." He smiled apologetically. "I was so ashamed of myself that I walked off. I don't know what Mr. Bryan must think of me."

Mary's colour had risen at the mention of Edward Bryan's name; but she looked at Ralph sympathetically.

"And yet you had nerve enough to run such a terrible risk and stop my horse," she said in a low voice. "Please get up and let me drive you to the Hall. It is the least I can do," she added, trying to smile; but the smile was a very fleeting one.

"I'm scarcely fit to ride beside you," he said, apologetically, and Mary laughed almost impatiently.

"Seeing that it was in my service—in the saving me from a terrible fate, Lord Ratton, it needs no excuse, surely."

Ralph got up beside her, the horse turned quietly and most steadily back towards the Manor.

"Shall I drive?" he asked, devoutly hoping that she would refuse his offer.

"Oh, no, thank you," she said. "He is quite right now; and very probably he may never bolt again."

"I trust you will never drive him again," he said, impressively. "You ought not; you really ought not to run any risk, Lady Mary! Think what we—your father—would suffer if anything were to happen to you!"

Mary scarcely noticed the "we."

"I don't suppose I shall drive him again," she said; "though I am not in the least afraid."

"No, I know you are not," he said, sending an admiring glance at her. "I don't think you know what fear means. I saw your face as you came along, and it was quite calm and—and fearless. Most women would have been half dead with terror."

Mary laughed and shook her head.

"I must decline to admit that, for the credit of my sex, Lord Ratton. But it was what father would call 'a near thing,'" she added, gravely; "and but for you—" She stopped, but the break in the sentence was eloquent enough. Lady Mary was not one to gush, but her heart was full of gratitude to this young man, whom hitherto she had regarded

with something approaching distrust; and Ralph sat in a glow of conscious heroism.

Luck remained with him, for as they got up to the lodge gate of the Manor, Lord Hatherley came through.

"Hallo, Molly! back already?" then he noticed Ralph's condition, and exclaimed: "Ratton! Why! What has happened, Molly?"

"It's all right, father!" she hastened to assure him. "That is, thanks to Lord Ratton. Now, don't be frightened or upset, dear," for his face had paled, and he looked from one to the other anxiously. "The fact is, Timothy bolted—on the top of the hill, you know; poor fellow, it wasn't his fault, I'm sure; and we were on the tear for the bottom—"

"The gravel pit!" murmured Lord Hatherley, hoarsely.

"Yes—but it's all right, father!" she said, soothingly, but a little tremulously, as the whole scene rose before her—"and just by the rails Lord Ratton, who happened to be standing there, sprang forward in the pluckiest, noblest way, and stopped us. If you are still alarmed it should be on his account, for he was dragged some distance, and must be cut and bruised—see his face."

Lord Hatherley laid a trembling hand on Ralph's arm and looked up at him with inexpressible gratitude. He was unable to utter a word for a moment, but at last he got out huskily:

"God bless you, Ratton! You saved my girl from certain death! I know that spot. God bless you! Come in. I'll try to thank you presently; just for the moment I'm too shaken. That gravel pit! Are you hurt? My dear fellow, you may be seriously hurt. Dragged! Did you say he was dragged some distance, Molly? Good God!"

Ralph played his part remarkably well.

"I'm not in the least hurt, Hatherley"—he had got the name out without the title at last!—"and I think Lady Mary fancies I was dragged further than I really was; but I'm not in a condition to come into the house. I'll get down here and run across the park to the Hall."

But Lord Hatherley would not hear of this.

"I'll drive you home," he said. "You are able to walk, Molly?" anxiously.

"Why, of course, dear! I have never left the cart for a moment. Yes, drive Lord Ratton home."

But Ralph refused to separate them at such a moment, and jumped down from the cart. Hatherley caught him by the hand and looked at him earnestly.

"I'll let you go on one condition, Ratton," he said, "that you come up and dine with us to-night; then I shall know that you are unhurt. We shall be alone."

Ralph accepted and went away with a quick step, and Lord Hatherley stood and watched him out of sight before getting up beside Mary.

"What a noble fellow!" he said in a low voice. "I can see the whole thing. It was the pluckiest thing imaginable: this beast is big and heavy and was coming down hill. Oh, Molly! Molly! what a debt I owe him!"

"Yes, father, a debt we can never pay," she said in a low voice, and very gravely; for something—was it a premonition of the consequences of that morning's business?—filled her with vague forebodings.

"He is a true Ratton," said Hatherley. "With all their faults, they have never shown the white feather. Molly, own that you have—well, been rather prejudiced against, rather unjust to, him. You were wrong, Molly, you see; wrong!"

She looked down, a troubled expression in her eyes.

"I was wrong, dear," she said almost in a whisper. "No man could have acted more nobly, more unselfishly. I can never be too grateful—can never forget it."

"And I—well"—he drew a long breath and put his arm round her—"I owe him a debt I can never pay: my child's life!" The tears were in his eyes and his voice broke as he looked away. "Think, Molly, how it would have been with me if—if—you had been brought home—" He shuddered. "May God bless and keep him!"

Of course, the groom told the story in the stable-yard and in the servants' hall; told it with the appropriate emphasis, and yet with a certain expression of surprise.

"Wouldn't think he was such a good-plucked one, would you?" he said; "and I'll take my oath, he don't know more about a horse than that chair! I could see that by the way he held him. But there! There is no getting away from the fact that if it hadn't a-been for his lordship, our Lady Mary would have been lying at the bottom of that danged gravel pit, with a nearly new dog-cart and a first-rate horse into the bargain!"

Equally, of course, the two farm hands carried the story into Market Ratton, and the news spreading round the town just as the *Ratton Gazette* was going to press, that usually sleepy journal woke up for once, and came out with a sensational report, headed: "Heroic rescue of a lady by the Earl of Ratton!"

The whole town was in a state of excitement, and bubbling over with admiration. Lord Ratton had already made himself popular by his condescension and "friendliness" in the marquee on the night of his entrance to the property; but this exploit tickled the public palate and gave them an excuse for enthusiasm. As the *Gazette* gushed, "they were proud of him."

Strange to say, the news of the heroic rescue did not reach the Bryans at the Court until the next morning, when Sir Gilbert read the report aloud at the breakfast-table.

Lady Bryan exclaimed; but Edward set down his coffee-cup and saucer without a word; but his face was pale. Mary so near death, and saved by Ralph the earl, the man who tumbled off his horse a few minutes before, and was so upset by the accident that he walked off in a huff! It seemed incredible.

He rose, after a moment.

"I must go up to the Manor," he said, huskily. "She may have been hurt, all those hours ago, and I didn't know of it!"

Of course, both his father and mother knew how it was with him, and the fact that this beloved second son loved Lady Mary and was too poor to marry her was as an added drop in the bitterness of Sir Gilbert's cup.

"Won't after breakfast do, Edward?" his mother pleaded, timidly. "Dear Mary is sure to be all right, or we should have heard of it. The account says that she was not in the least injured—not even frightened."

"Finish your breakfast, my boy," said his father; but Edward looked from one to the other with a rather grim smile.

"I couldn't," he said, simply. "I must go and see how she is—learn the whole truth."

His mother followed him into the hall. At times she was almost—only almost—induced to rebel against the Providence that had decreed that her dearly loved son, the boy of her heart, should fall in love where love seemed hopeless. He had only returned yesterday, after four years of absence, and it was as if he had come back to suffer that worst of sufferings, the agonies of baulked love.

"Is it any use, dear?" she murmured, her mother's eyes full of tender anxiety as she watched him hunt for his cap.

He bent and kissed her, and patted her hand soothingly, as a strong man soothes the mother who is fretting about him.

"I don't know, mother. Who can tell? But if it were of no use, I couldn't help it. I've got to go on loving her."

"Her father would never consent. The property goes to the nephew, that boy at Eton, and, as you know, she must marry well."

"I know—I know," he said, gravely. "That's why I went abroad, why I shall have to go again. Don't fret about it, mother. There's hope for me. Mary—"

He did not finish; but Lady Bryan understood; and, of course, was not surprised. How could any girl help loving this handsome, manly son of hers? she thought, as she watched him mount his horse from which Ralph had tumbled, and ride away at a sharp canter. But swiftly as he rode, his thoughts went more quickly. Love is prone to jealousy, and keen at scenting a possible rival; and suddenly it occurred to him that he might have a rival in the new Earl of Ratton.

He had thought that Ralph had looked at Mary once or twice at the dinner-party—well, as a man looks when he is interested in a girl; but he had tried to persuade himself that it was only fancy on his part. But this morning it seemed to him the most natural thing in the world that Ralph should fall in love with Mary. And if it were so, what chance would he, the penniless second son, have against the richest and most powerful nobleman in the county, especially after that nobleman had saved Mary's life? And yet he felt that Mary loved him, or would learn to love him. They had been playmates together; he had, in the old child-days, called her his "little wife," and she had not resented his half avowal of love the other night! Oh, if he were only rich! if he had only been able to make some money during the last four hard years!

He found Mary in the rose-garden, and her face blushed as redly as the flowers in her hand as he came up to her with outstretched hand, his face grave and anxious.

"Oh, I am so glad to see you—out here and all right!" were his first words, and his strong hand closed tightly over her soft warm one.

"Is that why you came—to see?" she said with a smile—the smile with which the woman who loves tries to hide her joy at the presence of the man whose footfall, whose lightest word, has power to stir her heart.

"I came at once. I only heard at breakfast, through the paper—"

She made a little grimace.

"Oh, that paper! Father read it to me."

"But it is true?" he said. "He—he did save you?"

She nodded gravely, and turned to pick a rose.

"Yes," she said, "Lord Ratton saved me. It is a correct account, though it exaggerates and colours."

"All the same, he saved you," said Bryan. "And for that I owe him a debt."

Mary laughed a little uneasily.

"That is what father has been saying ever since," she said. "But it is quite true," she added, quickly. "We do owe him a debt; nothing less than my life."

Edward almost groaned.

"Oh, why wasn't I there? I wasn't far off. I'd only just ridden back to the Court. I'd been with Lord Ratton."

"Yes; he told me—told me that he had fallen off his horse."

"He told you that!" exclaimed Edward, with some surprise. "I can't make him out! He—well, he seemed to me the last man to risk his life for anyone or anything."

Mary looked down gravely.

"But he did," she said, "and it was a wonder he was not hurt or killed. He behaved most nobly."

Edward took off his cap and wiped his brow. He had ridden fast, but the perspiration was not caused only by his ride.

"And—and your father?" he said.

"Father was terribly frightened when he heard, and, of course, very grateful to Lord Ratton. He dined with us last night; and father has gone over to the Hall this morning to advise Lord Ratton about some new stables."

The penniless second son groaned inwardly.

"Of course your father is grateful to him," he said. "I myself am grateful—so grateful that I'd do and say anything, go anywhere, to show it. But oh, Mary, why was it not I who saved you?"

She crimsoned, then went pale, and stood tremblingly waiting; for the man's heart had declared itself too openly for him to stop at this. He took her hand and held it in a grip that almost hurt her.

"Mary," he said, brokenly, "I didn't mean to speak out. All the way home I told myself that I would not, that I was a failure, and until I had done something to redeem that failure, I must in honour hold my tongue. It was hard work to keep my vow yesterday, when I saw you for the first time for all these years, and you looked so beautiful, so pure. I've seen you in all my dreams; and when haven't I dreamt of you! Mary, you know that I love you; you know it. I've loved you ever since we were boy and girl together. You are

part and parcel of my life. The hope that I might one day win you for myself, for my very own, has kept me going, kept me straight, at times when nothing else would have supported me or kept me from going to the dogs. Oh, my dearest—don't be angry with me, Mary; bear with me, dear. If you knew how precious you are to me, how I love you—"

Her face was pale now, and the roses had dropped disregarded to the path, and her hands were clasped tightly.

"In every man's life there is one love which is sweeter and more desirable to him than life itself, and my love for you is of that kind. I ought not to tell you this, to talk like this; but, Mary, something—I don't know what it is, I can't explain it—fills me with dread and forces me to speak. See, dearest—you'll let me call you so without offence, Mary, for you are and always will be dearest to me—my mind is full of misgivings, of dread. Bear with me, dear; consider how I stand. I am a nobody, and poor, and—and there are others—Oh, I must speak plainly. There is, for instance, this other man, the new Lord Ratton."

She started, and her face grew paler. The premonition which had sprung into her mind yesterday, sprang into it now with increased force and power.

"He is what he is—the possessor of an old title—is rich in land and money; and he—he—has saved your life. Mary, no man could see you without loving you."

She smiled for the first time, and shook her head; but he insisted.

"It is true. Where is there a lovelier girl than you? Where is there a sweeter? Who, with a heart in his bosom, could help loving you? I—I saw him the other night looking at you. Ah, don't be angry with me, Mary. If—if—it should be as I fear, what chance should I have against him? I am nothing—a nobody; he is an earl; I am poor, he is rich beyond counting—and he saved your life. But, Mary, I love you, love you, love you! I can't live without you. The hope of winning you is my life, just my life. Ah, Mary, speak to me—speak to me! Tell me that I may hope still!"

Few women—even a woman of the world who had sounded the whole of Love's gamut—could have resisted such an appeal coming from the heart and lips of the man she loved.

Mary turned to him, her face pale, her lips quivering, her very body vibrating with the thrill of love's music—music evoked by the touch of true love, as the harp thrills under the fingers of its master, and her eyes shone with all a woman's surrender in their pure depths.

He caught her to his breast, and held her there in the joy which scorns speech, and kissed her lips and brow passionately.

There was an arbour close to them, and, half unconsciously, he led her into it; and there they stood, his arm round her, her head resting on his breast. She was so happy in this new heaven of her lover's arms, that for a moment or two she forgot everything in her great joy; then suddenly she looked up at him, and murmured:

"Father!" For she was no woman of the world, only a girl just fresh from school.

"I know, dearest," he said, gravely. "He would not consent. That is why it was wrong for me to speak."

"There was no need. I—I knew," she whispered. "I knew the other night.

"And I meant to hide it from you," he said, with self-reproach. "I meant to go away without telling you. Your father wouldn't consent, and he'd be quite right. In the first place, I'm not worthy of you; and in the next, I'm poor. I know, dear;" for she had murmured something like "I don't care." "But *he* cares, and he is quite right to care. And so, Mary mine, I came to a resolution as I rode over this morning," he went on, trying to speak with a smile, and in a matter-of-fact voice. "I must go away again at once—"

"At once! Oh, Edward!"

The cry went to his heart; but he was a man, and remained firm.

"Yes, dearest, I must go. You see, if I stayed here I couldn't keep away from you"—she nestled a little closer to him—"and everybody would know that I loved you, and I should be sent away in disgrace, and bring trouble on you, and we should be parted forever, perhaps."

"No," she said, very quietly; "not forever, Edward."

"Hush!" he said. "I can't let you bind yourself to me, Mary. *I'm* bound to you for life, but you shall be free, free as air, until I come back with a fortune, and can claim you."

This generosity of his brought the tears to her eyes, and she hid them on his breast.

"I should be ashamed of myself if I went away and left you pledged to a mere adventurer; for that is what I am, Mary mine. But adventurers win the day sometimes, and I mean to win. I shall start at the end of the week—"

"Oh!" She drew a long breath. "So soon!"

"The sooner I go, the sooner I shall come back. Besides, there's danger in every day I stay. You see, I feel as if I

must go out into the market-place at Ratton and cry aloud, 'She loves me! she loves me!' I feel capable of any kind of madness in that way, I am so proud, so intoxicated—"

"And where will you go?" she asked, after a pause which was more eloquent than any words could be.

"I shall go West, to British Columbia—Vancouver," he said. "I met a man on the homeward voyage who gave me some accounts of openings there; but it's too long to tell you now, dearest, and there is so much to be said. I'll ask you not to forget me, Mary; but you shall not pledge or bind yourself. You shall be quite free to—to marry anyone; only—only"—he tried to laugh—"don't marry anyone—Lord Ratton, for instance—if you can help it."

She started; then she smiled up at him, a glorious smile which put to shame any verbal promise.

"I will not marry—Lord Ratton, if I can help it," she said in a low voice.

"I'm more than content, dearest," he said almost solemnly. "And now I'll go; and how much happier I shall go than I went last time! To know that you love me! Why, Mary, no matter what happens to me, that thought ever in my mind, I *must* win! I dare not write to you, dear; but you will hear of me from the mother. I shall write to her regularly, and tell her to show you my letters, just to keep me in your mind. Good-bye, dearest, if we don't meet again, and we may not."

She put her arms round his neck and drew his head down and kissed him; and he got out of the arbour somehow, mounted his horse and rode away; and it was well that he rode better than Lord Ratton, for there was a mist before his eyes which rendered him quite incapable of seeing where he was going.

* * * * * * *

Lord Hatherley came home to lunch, so full of enthusiasm over Ralph that he did not, for a moment or two, notice that Mary was pale and sad-eyed.

"The more I see of him, the more I like him," he said. "I never knew a young fellow so—so unassuming and modest, and so ready to take advice. We've been over the stables—they wanted overhauling badly—and I've ventured to give him some tips, which he was very grateful for. I should have stayed to lunch, but—in the nicest way possible—he did not press me, because, as he said, you would be alone. Why, *Molly, how pale you look, and—you haven't been crying, dear, have you? What is the matter?*"

Mary turned away to hide her face.

"I—I have a headache," she faltered.

"The effects of the fright yesterday," he said, tenderly. "You must go and lie down, dear!"

She kissed him before she went, and as she bent over him her eyes overran with tears; for her sweetheart was leaving her, and, for the first time in her life, she was concealing something from the father who loved her so dearly.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE story of Lord Ratton's "gallant rescue," as the *Gazette* continued to call it in paragraphs and leaders for several weeks, spread round the county, and raised Ralph to a position and popularity which he would not have reached in the ordinary course for years. People made haste to call upon him, he was flooded with invitations; and wherever he went he won golden opinions; for he was quick to observe and learn, and he saw that his line was "to sit tight and say nothing" or little. Being an actor, he was also quick to imitate, and in an incredibly short time he managed to acquire at least the outward veneer of breeding. He learnt to address the men without their titles, and to salute the ladies with that air of deference which surprised him when he had first seen it; for hitherto he had regarded women as inferior creatures, to be petted or bullied as the mood dictated. He began to feel less ashamed and self-conscious when he entered a room full of people or met two or three men unexpectedly. He got a quiet horse and learnt to ride—in the early morning when there was no one about.

Nearly everyone called him "a good fellow," and even those few who regarded him with a kind of doubt, admitted that he was "doing his best;" and all agreed that he was liberal with his money. He subscribed to everything—the cricket and football clubs, the hounds, the county races, the new steeple for Market Ratton church; and even the Wesleyan minister came away from the Hall with a cheque for the fund of the rebuilding of the chapel, and had nothing but good to say of his lordship. When Ralph rode or drove into Market Ratton, the trades-people came out to their doors with bows and smiles to receive his orders, and everywhere men touched their hats to him with eager respect and desire to win his good-will.

He spent money freely, and not selfishly. New cottages were put in hand for the labourers on the estate, and the ten-

ants had only to ask for repairs and improvements to obtain them.

"It's well we have plenty of money," Greyfold, the steward, remarked to Mr. Bulpit, "for we're spending it right and left. His lordship will be the most popular landlord in England, if he goes on like this. Giles went to him yesterday, and got him to promise a new homestead—or very nearly a new one; and only a few days ago he told me that he had decided to pull down that row of cottages in Golden Lane and rebuild them. Yes, he'll be the model landlord, Mr. Bulpit!"

Mr. Bulpit grunted and coughed.

"Yes," he said; "but it makes it rather hard for the other landlords who have no money to spend, and whose tenants are drawing comparisons between them and Lord Ratton."

"You'd better drop him a hint, then," said Mr. Greyfold, "or he'll get himself disliked by his own class, and that won't counterbalance his popularity with the lower. You know that there is to be a grand dinner-party at the Hall on the sixth? It will be the biggest affair the old Hall has seen for many a day. I've ordered the Hungarian band, and a *chef* is coming from London. It will only want one thing—a mistress! But I suppose we sha'n't have to wait long for that. Lord Ratton is far and away the best match in the county."

Mr. Bulpit nodded, but made no response. He had been watching the career of the new earl with keen interest and some surprise; for he had expected that the young man who had only a few weeks ago presented himself mud- and dust-stained at the Hall would "make a mess of it." And now here he was high in county and public favour, and bidding fair to be the most popular man in the county!

He drove over to the Hall on the afternoon of the day he and Mr. Greyfold had held the above conversation, and found Lord Ratton just returned from a ride on his quiet horse, and as his lordship greeted him pleasantly with a "Hallo! Mr. Bulpit; glad to see you," the old lawyer could not help remarking the change in the young man. The old restless, self-conscious air had disappeared—or nearly—and a newly acquired confidence and ease had taken its place. Only occasionally was that twist of the under-lip, the half-suspicious glance from the corners of the eyes, noticeable.

"Want to see me? Come in! Hot, isn't it? Bring some soda and whiskey," he added to the footman. "I'm glad you've come. I wanted to ask your advice. Shall I put the Hungarian band in the gallery on the sixth, or shall I keep

that for a cosy place for sitting out in, and stick the band somewhere else? There is sure to be some dancing—in quite an informal way, you know."

But Mr. Bulpit had no opinion to offer.

"I should think one of the ladies would be better able to advise you, Lord Ratton," he said in his dry, legal way.

Ralph nodded quickly and absently.

"Yes, I'll ask Lady Mary. No soda and whiskey—sure?" he said as Mr. Bulpit declined, and he mixed a glass for himself.

"I came for the signature to these leases," said Mr. Bulpit. "By the way, Mr. Greyfold tells me that you have consented to rebuild Giles's homestead."

Ralph nodded as he bit the end off a cigar, and seated himself on the arm of one of the old oak chairs.

"Yes; that's all right, isn't it? The man bothered about it, and I consented, to save any further trouble. It doesn't matter, does it?"

"Not to you, Lord Ratton," said Mr. Bulpit, with a grim smile; "but you are setting a rather painful standard, which your fellow landlords will find it difficult to reach. For instance, one of Lord Hatherley's tenants came to me yesterday wanting something done, and when I refused, he said he wished he was a Ratton tenant. You see?"

At the mention of Lord Hatherley's name Ralph's careless demeanour changed, and all in a moment came the watchful, sidelong glance.

"How do you mean?" he asked.

"That Lord Hatherley and a number of your neighbouring landlords are not so well off as you, Lord Ratton."

"I didn't know that Lord Hatherley was poor," said Ralph, with affected indifference.

Mr. Bulpit grunted.

"The Hatherley estate is entailed. It goes to a boy nephew, as no doubt you know; and Lord Hatherley is anxious to make some provision for his daughter, Lady Mary. All his savings are invested with that object; but if he were to administer the estate on your liberal scale, there would be no savings to invest."

Ralph nodded, and smoked thoughtfully.

"I see," he said. "Now, what does he invest in?" he asked, so casually that Mr. Bulpit was taken off his guard, so to speak.

"*In railways* generally; but lately he has been buying min-

ing shares—very much against my advice," he added, grumpily, as he spread out the leases for his lordship's signature.

"Some mines pay very well, don't they?" said Ralph, as casually as before.

"Hem!—yes; but I'm not sure that the New Golconda will. Sign here, please, my lord. I hope you bear in mind the hint I have presumed to give you."

Ralph looked up with a laugh.

"I always bear your hints in mind, and act upon them, Bulpit. And you'll admit that things have worked out pretty well, eh?" he said, with a covert air of triumph, and just a suspicion of the twist of the under-lip.

"Very well, indeed, my lord, and I congratulate you," said Mr. Bulpit.

Ralph straightened his shoulders, and looked round with an air of self-satisfaction.

"You'll be here on the sixth, Bulpit?"

"I'm afraid not, my lord," said the old lawyer, quietly but firmly.

"Oh, but you must!" insisted Ralph.

"I must ask your lordship to excuse me," said Mr. Bulpit, as he gathered his deeds together. "I seldom go into society, and I know that your lordship will have no lack of guests."

Ralph laughed as he flung himself into the arm-chair.

"What a dry old stick you are, Bulpit? 'Pon my word, I sometimes think you'll never forgive me for being who and what I am!"

The old man coloured.

"You do me an injustice, my lord," he said, gravely, and with perfect self-possession. "In my profession we have no room or use for prejudices."

Ralph looked after him as he drove off in his old-fashioned phaeton.

"The old devil hates me—for some reason," he muttered. "I wonder why? Not that it matters;" and he turned away with a laugh of contempt and conscious power.

The Times lay on the table, and he picked it up and turned to the morning news in the money article.

New Golcondas were "firm" at present.

"If anything should go wrong with them; and it might," he muttered. Then he flung the paper from him with an oath. "What does it matter to me? I'm tied hand and foot. But if I were free!"

A little later he walked over to the Manor.

Scarcely a day passed without a visit from him, and Lord

Hatherley was always glad to see him, and greeted him, as on this occasion, with:

"Oh, is that you, Ratton? Come in, my dear fellow. Mary, here is Lord Ratton."

And Mary would come forward with a smile, but a grave and, as it seemed to Ralph, a sad and cold one.

"I've come to ask Lady Mary's advice," he said this afternoon. "Where shall I put the band, in the gallery or in the hall?"

They discussed the question for some time, until, in sheer weariness, Mary decided in favour of the hall, and then, on some pretext or other, left her father and Ralph together.

"Do you know anything about mining shares," asked Ralph, when the door had closed upon her.

Lord Hatherley looked up quickly, and laughed in his frank way.

"Not much, I must confess, though I hold some," he replied.

"Yes?" said Ralph, quietly. "I'm told that the New Golconda is a good thing; and I shall buy some."

"How strange!" exclaimed Lord Hatherley. "That is the mine in which I hold some shares."

Ralph laughed.

"Then I'm sure to be all right," he said. "I hear they are going to do wonders."

"Really? I—I think I will buy some more; I have a little spare capital," remarked Lord Hatherley.

Ralph said no more, but quietly changed the subject, as if he attached little importance to it; but as he walked back to the Hall his brain was hard at work.

Every time he saw Mary, the longing for her grew more intense, the loathing of his bondage more bitter.

There were times when he almost forgot the existence of the wife he had deserted, when, surrounded by women who were anxious to make things pleasant for him, mothers with marriageable daughters who smiled upon him, the daughters themselves eager to win his approval, he would almost persuade himself that he was as free as they thought him; but he never entered or left Lady Mary's presence without being reminded of the fact that somewhere—in some slum or other—was the woman who any moment might discover that she was the Countess of Ratton.

The night of the great party arrived, and as he stood in the hall receiving his guests, his eyes shining with triumph, a smile

obliterating the sinister twist of his lip, not one imagined that there was a canker in the rose of his prosperity.

It was soon seen that the young earl intended to mark this initial entertainment of his with something like magnificence.

The dinner was a superb one; the somewhat sombre hall had been relieved and lightened by palms and exotics whose brilliance shone against the old oak; the vast conservatory was illuminated by parti-coloured electric lights, and the fountain in the centre scattered a delicate perfume. Near the conservatory was stationed the famous Hungarian band, which played softly during the dinner, but started a waltz soon after the coffee had been served in the drawing-room.

"Is there to be a dance, Lord Ratton?" exclaimed the young duchess, her foot beating time to the music.

"There shall be anything you please, duchess," he said.

"Then I please to dance," she responded, gaily; and he offered her his arm, and led her into the hall.

The others followed. The spirit of gaiety stirred the brilliant crowd, and, with a buzz of excitement which was somewhat novel in a country house, they began to dance.

"Ratton is doing the thing in grand style," remarked Lord Parodel to Lord Hatherley. "We don't often have an entertainment of this Arabian Nights' kind in Downshire."

"Oh, he's the most generous, the most liberal-hearted of young men!" responded Hatherley, warmly. "It was a lucky day for the county when he came into Ratton. He's a real good fellow, too!"

He was not alone in this opinion, for many echoed it as they looked at Ralph as he danced with the young duchess—he danced well, they noticed—or moved amongst his guests. His dark eyes were flashing; there was a triumphant smile on his lips.

"All this is mine; these great people are my guests. I am the Earl of Ratton!" he was saying to himself, while those who watched him thought he was simply pleased by the success of his party. And that it was going to be a great success who could doubt? The admirable dinner, the costly floral decorations, the heavenly band, filled the hearts of the guests with delight. But there was one exception. Lady Mary, the loveliest girl in the room, looked pale, and preoccupied. She smiled, for the most unsophisticated of girls can smile when their hearts are breaking; but one woman, at least, knew the worth of that smile. Lady Bryan had glanced at her once or twice during dinner, and now, as the dancing commenced, she came up to her.

"My dear, I haven't been able to get near you," she said. "How gay and brilliant it all is, isn't it?"

Mary assented in proper terms, and Lady Bryan, after a moment, whispered:

"I have just had a letter from—from Edward, dear. Would you like to read it? He asked me to give it to you."

Mary blushed like the rose, but, pale as a lily the next moment, took the letter and hid it in her bosom. Would she like to read it! She looked round the room for a quiet corner. She saw Lord Ratton standing, the centre of an admiring group of courtiers, his dark eyes flashing, his lips curved with a smile of success and triumph. The expression of his face jarred upon her, though he had saved her life, and, with her hand pressed upon the spot where the precious letter was hid, she went through the conservatory on to the terrace, and finding a seat, sat down and took out the letter.

She had scarcely read the first words, when Ralph came out from the conservatory. He had looked round for her, intending to ask her to dance with him, and, missing her, had come in search of her.

For a moment or two he stood and watched her, and as he saw that she was reading a letter, the passion of jealousy flamed up and joined the passion of desire.

His face went white, and the twist came to his under-lip. Scarcely knowing what he was doing, forgetting everything, he went towards her, and sank on the seat beside her.

She started, and crushed the letter in her hand, and turned with something like fear in her soft brown eyes.

"I—I startled you," he said. "I—I came in search of you. I want you—will you dance with me, Lady Mary? No, I don't want to dance; I want to speak to you. I—I—love you. I want you to be my wife."

She gazed at him, the fear deepening in her eyes.

"Lord Ratton!" broke from her pale lips with a kind of horror; for it seemed monstrous to her, this avowal of his, with her lover's letter crushed in her hand.

"I love you," he said, hoarsely, his face as pale as hers. "I—I want you to be my wife."

She rose and looked down at him, for he seemed incapable of moving.

"Oh, no, no, no!" was all she could say, panting, and trying to repress a shudder.

"Why not?" he said, thickly. "What—what—is your reason?"

She pushed the hair from her forehead and looked from right to left, like a hunted animal seeking for escape, succour.

"Don't—don't ask me!" she said in a low voice; "please—please don't ask me! I—I could not! Oh, no, no!"

He rose, white to the lips.

"I've frightened you," he said. "Yes; that is it. I'm sorry. Don't—don't think any more of it. I'm sorry. I—I don't want to frighten, to force you. Shall we—shall we go into the house?"

Almost unconsciously she put her hand upon his arm. As they went through the conservatory he said, thickly:

"You—you won't say anything about—about this, Lady Mary?"

She shuddered openly now, as if with relief from a terrible peril.

"No, no!" she assented. "I will say nothing—nothing."

He nodded, and wiped his brow, looking round covertly, as if he feared that they might be overheard.

"No; say nothing. I—I—will wait," he muttered.

CHAPTER XV.

LET us return to the island.

For a day or two after that on which they discovered the gold, Rath scarcely saw Stella. It seemed to him that she avoided him; for when they caught sight of each other at a distance, she merely waved her hand, or called back in answer to his greeting, "Good-morning," or "Good-evening; I am very busy," and disappeared.

He came to the conclusion that he had offended her in some way; perhaps in not making enough fuss over the useless gold; but, though he missed her much more than he knew, he did not go in search of her or approach the hut. He was very busy just at this time, for the autumn was drawing nigh, and he was preparing for the winter which would follow in its wake. The corn was ripe, and he had to cut the little patch and garner it until he should have time to thresh it; and there were the potatoes to dig, and the honey to gather; but, busy as he was, he would stop suddenly in the middle of the toil, which would have daunted an ordinary labourer, straighten his back, and sigh, as he looked round in the hope that she might be near. He scarcely knew why he missed her; did not realise that her presence had lightened his toil and sweetened his hitherto solitary existence; but at

night he went home to his nest in the hollow tree, feeling strangely lonely and melancholy. On both evenings he climbed up to the north cliff and looked seaward, in the hope —or was it the dread?—of sighting a vessel; but no sail broke the vacancy of the opal sea.

Stella was not offended. If she had been asked, she would have found it difficult to tell why she kept away from him. Her up-bringing had been almost as solitary as his own, and her innocence matched his. She was not offended; but a strange shyness, of which she was only half conscious, had fallen upon her. It had smitten her as she lay in his arms, across his breast, when he carried her along the beach. For the first time, as her head rested on his broad shoulder, and she could feel his breath on her cheek and stirring her hair, she had felt afraid of him. And yet it was not fear in the ordinary sense of the word; for fear is a painful emotion, and there was no pain, but a subtle joy and peace in her heart; the blush which covered her face, which made her turn it from him as she walked away, was not caused by fear.

She wanted to forget that he had carried her in his arms—to remember that she was "just a boy;" but the memory clung to her, sleeping and waking, and annoyed her; so that at times she was almost angry with him for having done so.

The heart of every woman is a mystery; how much greater the heart of a young girl as innocent and unsophisticated as Stella?

But she missed Rath more than he missed her. Her daily tasks were lighter and less numerous; they were soon done, and then time—the time which always passed so quickly when she was with him—hung heavily on her hands. And she could not make a companion of her mother; for the elder woman's apathetic condition had increased, and she seemed content to lie back in the arm-chair in the hut, or just outside the door, her hands folded in her lap, her eyes fixed dreamily and moodily on vacancy, or closed, as if in sleep.

While Stella had grown in strength as well as in beauty since their arrival in the island, her mother had wasted and become weaker. Stella waited on her lovingly and watched her anxiously, and now and again strove to arouse her to some interest in the life which Stella found so delightful; but without success. Beyond a little needle-work, she did nothing—indeed there was no need—and she could not be induced to walk more than a few yards from the hut.

"Let me be, Stella," she said, when Stella begged her to accompany her to the beach, the woods, the lowest of the

cliffs, walks which she herself delighted in. "Let me be. I am, if not content, resigned; and I am too weak to walk."

She grew thinner and paler each day, and the eye of experience would have seen in her countenance signs which boded ill; but Stella was not experienced, and had no forebodings.

To pass away the time, while she kept away from Rath, Stella was driven to the books on the shelf in the hut. I say driven, because she was not at any time very fond of reading; and on this fairy isle, with its clear, bracing air and sunny skies, one did not hanker after books as one longs for them, and depends upon them, in this fog-girt isle of Britain. The whole place was one open book to her, and with Rath by her side to point out and explain, she had found it delightful reading; but now she turned to the printed volumes and pored over them by the hour together, until she would fling them from her with a yawn, and—wonder what Rath was doing, and whether he missed her.

On the afternoon of the third day she saw Rath in the distance, striding towards the interior with his axe in his hand, and knew that he was going to fell trees for firewood. She saw him stop and look back towards the hut, and once he saw her and waved his hand; she waved hers in response, and then, thinking he would not be back for some time, took the volume of essays she was reading into the shadow of the pines, and curling herself upon a bed of fragrant pine "needles," tried to read; but the book did not hold her long; her mind wandered after Rath.

She could see him swinging the shining axe, hear the sharp thud as it struck the tree, see his tall, graceful figure as he leant back for another swing and cut. How strong he was! Were all men so strong? she wondered. He had lifted and carried her as if she had been a feather, and his arms had encircled her as if they were steel bands. There it was again! She could not forget it! With an impatient *moué* she opened the book again, and with a frown forced her attention to it; but presently her quick ears caught the sound of footsteps—Rath's—and for a moment she felt for the first time a strange desire to rise and fly from him. But it was too late; for he had seen her, and with an involuntary exclamation he quickened his pace and stood beside her.

She looked up with a beautiful start and ejaculation of surprise.

"*Oh! is that you?* How you startled me!" she said.

"*Did I?*" *he said,* innocently. "I should have thought

you would have heard my footsteps; I should know yours the moment I heard them."

"I thought you were cutting trees," she said, rather severely.

"So I was," he said; "but I have broken the handle of my axe." He dropped the broken tool at her feet and sat down beside her with the obtuseness and self-unconsciousness of the man. "Where have you been for the last two days, Stella?"

She yawned indifferently as she replied, with fine sarcasm:

"On this island."

"Yes, I know," he said, with his usual seriousness; "but why haven't you come to help me as you used to do?"

"I've been busy," she said, absently, and apparently extremely interested in her book. "Busy about—about the hut. I don't suppose you've missed—wanted me."

"Yes, I have," he replied. "I've missed you very much."

"Oh, thanks. I didn't know I was of so much use to you."

"It isn't that," he remarked, with appalling candour. "It isn't that you help me so much; but I miss you somehow. I don't know why. I never felt lonely, or to want anyone with me, until you came."

She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye and closed the book over her thumb.

"But I daresay I should have got used to being alone again if I had not had you with me for another day or two."

She opened the book suddenly, and became absorbed in it again.

"Perhaps it would be just as well if I did get used to it," he went on, musingly; "then I sha'n't miss you so much when you go."

"I'm not gone yet, and I don't see much chance of going," she remarked, without looking up.

"No," he assented, gravely. "Not until the Indians come. I might arrange with them to send someone for you."

There was silence for a moment, as he began to cut the broken handle from the head of the axe, for Rath was seldom idle; then he said, meditatively:

"I thought you might be offended about something."

"Offended? Oh, dear, no! What at?"

"I don't know. Perhaps because I didn't attach so much importance to your discovery of the gold; or because I carried you the other day. I suppose no one likes being carried against their will, though you seemed unable to walk."

"Did you carry me?" she said, lifting her brows until they almost joined the hair on her forehead. "Ah, yes; I remember. Oh, no, I'm not at all offended. Though I hope you won't do it again. I *hate* being carried."

"So you said," he remarked, placidly. "No, I won't do it again. Where are you going?" for Stella had risen.

"Into the wood for a stroll."

"Better not," he said, casually. "I saw a panther just now. Just my luck; I'd left my gun behind."

She was back beside him, her hands on his shoulders, like a flash of lightning.

"A—a panther? Oh, Rath!"

And she shivered as she reflected that she might have met that panther any moment during the last two days—alone, and without Rath to protect her.

"Yes; he has come after the calves, I suppose. I'll track him to-morrow. You need not be frightened; he won't come here," he added, with his short laugh.

She snatched her hand from his shoulder and flung herself down again—but farther from him.

"I was *not* frightened—that is, not much," she said, with injured dignity, as she opened the book again and read it—upside down.

"What is that—the book?" he asked, after a pause, and intent upon his axe.

"Essays—Emerson's," she said. "Dry old things. Do you like them? Oh, I forgot!" she broke off, penitently—"I forgot you couldn't read, Rath."

"No," he said, cheerfully.

She looked at him curiously, her chin in her hand.

"Don't you sometimes wish you could read, Rath?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"No, I don't think so. My father said that most of the trouble in the world came of reading and writing."

"I wonder whether he was right?" she murmured, dreamily.

"Everything he said was right," he said, calmly.

"Not everything," rejoined Stella. "For instance, he—he said that women were dangerous, and you know now that that wasn't right."

He was silent over this poser.

"But wouldn't you like to read, Rath?"

He thought for a moment.

"Y-es. Perhaps in the winter, when there is not so much to do, it would pass the time; not that I have much time."

She drew herself a little nearer to him.

"If you like, I'll teach you," she said, with a fine air of indifference. "I'll teach you to read and write—that is, I'll try; and if you don't like it, why, you needn't go on. You are not obliged to do either if you don't care about it."

"Well, perhaps it's just as well to know how," said this gentlemanly savage; "though my father said that all that was worth knowing in the island could be learned without books."

"Yes, on the island, perhaps; but if you left it—"

He shook his head.

"I shall never leave it," he said.

"You don't know; but never mind. See here; I must begin by teaching you your letters—"

He glanced at the sun.

"I haven't much time. Will it take long?"

"It all depends on whether you are stupid or not," she said, rather piqued.

"I expect I shall be stupid," he said, gravely; but he drew up closer to her, so that he could look over the book on her lap, and the lesson commenced.

In a few minutes they were both interested. Stella forgot her shyness, the reserve of the last two days melted like snow in summer, and soon she was leaning back, her eyes sparkling, her laughter rippling like music over his blunders.

"You stupid! That isn't B; that's a D. I've shown you the difference twenty times."

"I'm sorry," he said, gravely and humbly. "I told you I should be stupid. I'm not so quick to learn as you are."

She was tender self-reproach in a moment.

"I'm not quick, Rath."

"Oh, yes, you are," he said, confidently. "Think of all the things you have learnt since you have been on the island. Are all boys so quick? I don't think I was when my father taught me. But never mind; let me try again."

After all, he was quicker than she thought. He soon began to distinguish between the forms of the letters and their different sounds. His interest was awakened, and, to his surprise, he felt quite keen about the thing.

In her eagerness to teach him, Stella forgot her shyness and restraint of the last two days, and talked and laughed at him with all her old ease and freedom; and the small cloud which had hovered between them was dispelled by her innocent laughter.

The lessons were continued day by day. Sometimes they

would snatch an hour in the morning as well as the evening, and Rath would sit up at night poring over the book by the light of the lamp fed by the oil which he extracted from the seals.

One day Stella brought a sheet of paper and a pencil which she had found in the hut.

"I am going to teach you to write now, Rath," she said.

He regarded the instruments of torture in her hands rather gravely.

"Is it as hard as learning to read?" he asked, doubtfully.

"Oh, harder—ever so much!" she replied, with the cheerfulness of the person who has gone through the ordeal once and forever to the person who is facing it for the first time.

"Then I don't think I'll bother," he said; "reading is the hardest work I ever did, and if writing's worse—"

"Oh, but you must!" she insisted. "Fancy not being able to write! Why, every tiny little child in England can write; and the world wouldn't get on if they could not. There would be no letters, no—no business, no newspapers, no anything."

"I've got on very well without letters and newspapers here," he remarked, as he resumed his task of sawing up logs for the winter's fires.

"Here! Here we are out of the world, and we don't live—only exist. No, no; I don't mean that, Rath!" she corrected herself quickly, as the saw stopped, and he turned his head and looked at her. "Put that down this instant and come to school."

He obeyed—as usual—but cast a wistful glance at the logs, and sighed.

"Show me some writing," he said, as they sat side by side on the trunk of the fallen tree.

"Yes, I'll write you a letter, Rath; just as if I'd gone away and were writing to you. See?" She tore the paper in half and looked before her meditatively, her brows drawn straight in the agonies of composition. "I don't know what to say. How ridiculous! Between you and me, I hate letter-writing, Rath."

"Then don't let's trouble," he said, with alacrity, and preparing to rise; but she caught him by the sleeve and pulled him down again.

"You stay where you are, sir, until school is dismissed! The idea! As if people only did what they like! Pretty kind of world it would be!"

"A very nice world, I think," he said, meditatively. "I

should like to be always shooting and fishing and sailing, instead of hoeing corn, planting potatoes—"

"Hush!" she interrupted; and began to write quickly. "There! That's a letter," she said, handing it to him.

He looked at it gravely.

"You've been very quick to write so much. What does it say? Read it."

"I've half a mind not to. To let you wait until you have learnt to read writing; but you have been a good boy this morning, and I'll read it to you.

"'MY DEAR RATH,—I know that you will be glad to hear that I am quite well. I should like to say also that I am quite happy; but I find that I miss the island and you very much. It is very cold and wet and foggy here in England, and I think of the times you and I used to sit in the sun, looking at the beautiful sea all green and glittering, and the sky all blue; and how kind and good you always were to me. And oh, Rath! though I am back in the big world again, I often wish myself back with you and the cows and the chickens, fishing and shooting and cooking the dinner. I hope you are quite well and happy, and don't miss me very much. Of course, I want you to miss me a little, but not to be unhappy. And I hope you remember your promise when we parted: that you wouldn't forget me while you could help it, and that you wouldn't fall over the cliff again or be reckless in any other way.

"Your loving mate, STELLA."

She read this at first laughingly; but as she went on, the laughter died out of her voice, her eyelids quivered, her eyes grew moist, and her breath came rather unevenly.

And Rath sat and listened, his hands clasped loosely at the beginning, but gripping each other tightly towards the end. He did not know what was the matter, what ailed him, but there was a dull, aching pain in his heart which made him catch his breath.

Did she know that she was inflicting such pain by this artless letter? As she did not look up she did not see his face, and he uttered no word and made no sign of the agony which rent him. When she had finished, she said:

"There! That's a letter."

She was about to tear it up, but he took it from her gently.

"It is a very good one, I should think," he said, quietly, and with such restraint that not a note indicated his suffering.

He folded the paper into a small square, and put it in his breast-pocket.

"Oh, you will soon be able to write as good a one if you are as quick as you are at your reading," she said, with sudden and suspicious cheerfulness; and she swept her hands across her eyes swiftly, as if to brush a tendril of her soft hair from them; but her hand was moist after the action. "Now, you begin by making strokes like that. See?"

"It seems easy enough," he said; but, needless to say, his imitation was crooked and zigzag. "The pencil's so small," he apologised.

"It's your hand that's so big," she retorted. "No, it isn't, Rath. It's a long hand, but it's not big—for a man's: at least, I think not. And you needn't hold the pencil as if it were a dagger," she added, as he had progressed to pot-hooks and hangers. "See, like this. Oh, you stupid! Here, let me guide your hand."

She put hers over it, and the warm fingers closed over his in a soft embrace.

"That's better."

He paused in the middle of a line and reflectively regarded the hand which guided his.

"What a small hand you've got, Stella!" he remarked. She drew it away quickly, and, holding it before her, regarded it critically. "It's a pity it's so small," he observed; "that's why you can't hold things properly. But it's—it's pretty, somehow, like a bird's claw."

"It's like nothing of the sort," she retorted, indignantly. "A bird's claw, indeed! Go on with your lesson, please, and never mind my hand."

"Guide me again," he said. "I can do it much better when you are helping me that way."

But she would not.

"You must learn to do without guiding," she said, severely. "That's a little better; and I really think you'll learn to write presently."

After a pause, he said:

"Yes; but I don't see the use of it. I sha'n't want to write any letters. Stella."

"Well?" she asked, as if awakening from a reverie, though her eyes had been fixed on his painful efforts on the stony road of caligraphy.

"*Did you mean* what you wrote in that letter to me, or *was it only make-believe?*"

A faint colour rose to her face, but she said, indifferently enough:

"What was it? I forget now what I wrote."

"That you would miss me when you had gone away; that you were happy here on this island."

"Yes, of course; wouldn't you miss me?" she replied, casually.

"Yes," he said, slowly, without stopping his pothooks and hangers. "Yes, sometimes when I think of the time when you will be gone and I shall be alone, I feel dreadfully bad and—and mournful; as bad as when my—my father died." He was silent a moment, while his eyes rested on her downbent face with a strange expression in their lovely depths, an expression which had something more than wistful tenderness in it. Then he went on. "It will be as if the sun had ceased to shine or the stream to flow from the rocks; as if the birds had given up singing forever, and it was not worth while to get the trout or the skins for the Indians; as if it were not worth while living. You said in that letter that I was not to forget you if I could help it; but I am afraid I shall not be able to help it. With you it will be different. You will be in the great world you talk of, and will have plenty of people to talk to and live amidst, but I shall be quite alone again. You see, I have only you, Stella."

While he had been speaking, the girl's heart had responded like a harp whose strings are swept by an ignorant and inexperienced hand. Unseen by him, her colour came and went; but at the last words her face went pale, her lips quivered, and the long lashes hid the tell-tale tears in her eyes. Instinctively her hand stole out to him to touch him with a woman's consoling touch; for when a girl's heart is throbbing with pity and sympathy her fingers itch to express it. But something, of which she knew nothing, held her back. She drew her hand from him before it came in contact with his bare arm, and she said in a voice which, because of her effort to control it, sounded cold and indifferent:

"I must go now. I can't leave my mother any longer; she is not well."

He looked up at her gravely, as she stood beside him, tall and graceful as one of the Indian girls who sometimes accompanied the braves to the island.

"What is the matter with her?" he asked. Her face was turned away from him as she answered:

"*I don't* know. She is weak, and—and takes no interest

in anything. And she eats so very little—I am hungry all day—and she scarcely speaks."

"There is some medicine in the cupboard by the bed," he said.

"I know; but she will not take any. She lies back in the chair all day as if she were half asleep; but I know that she is not sleeping, for I see her lips move, and sometimes hear her murmur some words."

He nodded solemnly.

"It is as my father was before he died."

"Rath!" she cried, "you don't think that—that she is going to die?"

He regarded her with pity in his dark eyes.

"I hope not. But, Stella, why are you so frightened? Death is but sleep—my father said—sleep and rest. And you would not be alone as I was. I am here!"

She looked at him enigmatically for a moment, then turned away. When she had gone, Rath took out the "specimen" letter, and tried to decipher it; but he could not do so. It did not matter, for he had it by heart.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE lessons continued daily, and Rath made as much progress with his writing as he had done with his reading. But Stella did not guide his hand again. The subtle pain which had arisen within her when he carried her had been awakened by that close contact of the fingers, and, in a manner, she held aloof from him.

As the days passed and the autumn glided upon them, Rath had less time for "school;" for the preparation for the winter—with three mouths to fill instead of one—demanded a great deal of his time. But, hard as he worked, he felt strangely happy, especially when Stella was by his side. She had become a real helpmate by this time, and there was scarcely any of his tasks which she could not share; but he seemed gradually to have recognised the fact that, try as she would, she could not be as strong and capable as he was, and he would not permit her to overexert or tire herself.

"You sit there and rest while I drag these logs down to the clearing," he would say. "And you can sing if you like. Somehow I can always work better while you sing."

And she would sit on one of the felled trees and sing "Robin Adair," or "Hail, Smiling Morn," or "Where the Bee

Sucks;" and Rath, inspired by the sweet, lark-like voice, would work with renewed energy.

At night, when he parted with her, and went to his nest in the hollow of the tree—at Stella's instigation he had made a hut of it by walling round it—he often lay awake thinking of her, wondering what he should do when she left him; for in the autumn the Indians would be here, and he would be able to arrange for her departure; and the prospect of his loss of her would lay heavily upon him.

Sometimes, in the middle of their daily work, Stella would become sad and thoughtful; for in the midst of her happiness her mother's condition smote her with a kind of compunction. How could she be so happy and contented while her mother was so ill?

And one day she came running to Rath, who was repairing the cow-shed with sweet-smelling pine logs.

"Rath! Rath! my mother is ill—worse!" she said, pantingly, her lips quivering, her eyes full of tears.

He leant on his axe and regarded her sympathetically.

"You must come!" she said, half distracted by her anxiety. "Oh, come at once, Rath! I am frightened!"

He dropped his axe, and, with a kind of reluctance, followed her. He had never seen the elder woman since her embarkation on the island, and she had only seen him at a distance, and an almost superstitious fear possessed him.

"Is she so ill?" he asked, as his long strides kept pace with Stella, who was running.

"Yes, yes; oh, yes!" she wailed. "She was ill in the night, and this morning she is so weak she can scarcely speak."

He followed her into the hut; and, as he did so, he looked round half nervously. He had not entered it since Stella and her mother had been rescued by him, and taken possession. There were all the familiar things—his father's gun, the books, the medicine cupboard; but there were also the signs of feminine existence—a skirt, Stella's hat, made from reeds grown on the island, and other articles of woman's clothing.

He went slowly, reluctantly, to the bed, and looked down at the dying woman; for in a moment he saw the expression in her face which he had seen in his father's when he was near his end.

"She is very ill; she is going to die," he said, solemnly.

Stella stifled a cry.

"Why not?" he asked, gently. "She will be at peace—*at rest.* What more could anyone want?"

As he spoke, the dying woman opened her eyes.

"Stella!" she said in a low voice.

Stella knelt beside her.

"Mother, I am here."

The mother raised herself on her elbow.

"Stella, I am dying. It is best so. I do not care to live. But you—you are young, your life stretches before you. You will escape from this place. You will take your proper position in the world. The—the box! It will tell you all. Here—under my pillow."

Stella put her arm round her mother, and the woman looked round.

As she did so, she saw Rath standing like a statue beside the bed. She peered at him, shading her eyes with her wasted hand. Then she uttered a cry—a cry of recognition:

"I know you! I know you!" she panted. "You are—"

Her voice failed, and she fell back upon Stella's arm.

Rath dug a grave for her beside his father's. Amongst the books of the shelves was an old and tattered Prayer Book; and Stella, with tear-blinded eyes, read to herself the office for the dead, as Rath solemnly made the interment. They were now alone on the island. For a week she kept away from him, communing with her grief; but at the end of the week they met unexpectedly. She was plucking some flowers for her mother's grave, and he had stolen up to her unawares.

"Stella!" he murmured. Stella! I am sorry. But all must die!"

She rose from her knees and stood, the flowers in her hand, weak and irresolute. Instinctively, inspired by Nature herself, remembering how he himself had suffered by his father's death, he put his arm round her, as one boy might put his arm round another, and she crept within the succour of his strong arm and leant her head upon his breast.

"Oh, Rath, I am so lonely!" she wailed.

"Not while I am here," he said, gently. "I was alone, quite alone, till you came. Remember that I am here. Don't hide from me, Stella. I am sorry for you; oh, so sorry! We are alone together now."

She clung to him, weeping, sobbing, and moved by pity, his arms wound round still tighter, and—who had taught him, from whom had he learnt it?—his lips sought hers and kissed her. She drew away from him at once, and blushing a rosy red, began to talk of the work.

Yes; he was very busy, he said. His reading and writing lessons had taken up a great deal of his time, and the winter

was approaching. He wanted some trout to salt and preserve for winter consumption. She offered to catch some.

There was no need, he declared; but she got the rod and the tackle ready one day—a glorious autumn day—and announced that she was going a-fishing.

Her mother's death had wrought upon her, and she was pale and thin, her eyes a dark violet, her brows straight and heavy.

"Let me go, Rath," she said. "I want to help you. You know I can catch the trout."

He yielded at last, and pushed off the boat from the pebbly beach; then he went off to the interior to find the panther which had made one or two attacks upon the young calves.

As he stood on the beach and watched her skillfully row the boat into the bay, a kind of premonition assailed him; but he put it from him and went his way.

Stella rowed the boat to the mouth of the stream which the trout frequented, then dropped her anchor and worked her rod. But the fish did not rise, and, thinking they were lying farther out, she lifted the anchor and rowed into the bay.

She had not been fishing a quarter of an hour, when the wind rose and rocked the boat as if it were a cradle.

At the moment when she noticed this change of weather, the fish commenced to rise, and she went on fishing until, to her amazement, she found that she was drifting out farther.

She ran to the anchor line and pulled it in; but even as she did so, the breeze freshened, and she found that the boat was drifting out to sea.

She flew to the oars, and, in her haste, let one slip overboard. But she was not disheartened, and she stuck the remaining oar in the stern and strove to propel the boat towards the island. But the storm increased, and notwithstanding all her efforts, the boat drifted on the outgoing tide towards the sea.

She fought hard, but no fighting on her part seemed of any avail. The boat still drifted seawards and away from the island.

And on the beach Rath paced restlessly, his heart in his mouth and the one word "Stella" on his lips. Then, as the wind increased, he leapt into his canoe and paddled out. But soon that sea with its autumnal storm was too wild and rough for the canoe. It overturned, and with difficulty he swam ashore. And pantingly he gazed over the white-flecked ocean and called on Stella. And no answer came. He was alone *again.*

CHAPTER XVII.

He was alone; Stella had gone! And she, too, was alone in an open boat on that raging sea, and doubtless calling for him as he was calling for her!

He stood by the canoe on the beach, and the first moment of the abating of the wind he launched her and paddled out in search of the boat; but the waves were still so high, and the rain so blinding, that even if the boat had been near him he would not have seen it. Twice the canoe was upset, and, with difficulty, he managed to get to shore; but it was only to throw himself down beside the canoe, and, panting, waiting for a lull that he might resume his search.

When the wind dropped sufficiently he started again; but the rough and white-crested sea bore no boat on its stormy bosom. Thinking, hoping that she might have had strength to row into shore, farther up the island, though the wind had blown from the land, he paddled as far along the coast as—and farther than—it would have been possible for her to reach; but there was no sight of the boat, no answer came to his now hoarse cry of "Stella!" and at last he returned to the usual landing-place, ran the canoe ashore, and stood gazing with a man's agony of grief and bereavement tearing at his breast.

He had not eaten for many hours, he had been upset from the canoe and swum ashore twice, he had battled with the waves which had threatened to overwhelm him, and he was now near actual exhaustion; his limbs were racked with cramp and pain, and he shook and staggered to and fro like a great tree half torn from its roots by a hurricane; only his almost superhuman strength could have stood the terrible strain he had endured.

He dragged himself to his own hut, and lit his lamp, and tried to eat; but the morsel of bread he broke with his trembling hands seemed to choke him, and he could scarcely swallow a draught of water. From sheer exhaustion he dropped upon his bed and slept; but it was only for a little while. He dreamt that he saw Stella sitting in the boat, her face turned to him appealingly, her hands clasped; he thought he heard her voice, and he sprang up and out into the dark night to realise that it was only a dream, and that Stella had gone.

The next morning the treacherous sea was calm and shining in the sunlight, as if the hideous storm of the preceding day was but a phantasmagoria of the brain; and Rath pad-

dled along the coast, searching every bay and inlet—searching now, alas! for Stella's dead body; but there were no signs of her or the boat. And, indeed, he knew within his heart that his quest must be futile, for the wind had been seaward, and the boat, even if it had overturned, must have been blown away from the island.

He returned at nightfall, white and weary, and, as he landed, his bereavement, his desolation, the full extent of his loss broke upon him. He flung himself down on his face, and with arms outstretched, battled in silence with his misery.

The love of man for woman he had never heard, never read of; therefore the agony that tortured him was, in a sense, something of a mystery; but he knew that, now Stella was gone, life had suddenly become hateful, that the solitude of which he had been scarcely conscious before she came, seemed unendurable. If he had only been with her, if he could only have died with her! But she had gone, was drowned, and he was doomed to live on here alone—how long? How long? he asked himself.

He sat for hours in the darkness, going over the incidents of the life they had spent together, as a man counts the items of the treasure of which he has been robbed. The dog crept near him and licked his hand in dumb sympathy; but Rath, for the first time, pushed it away almost fiercely, for it reminded him of Stella. Everything reminded him of her, and as he walked past the hut he averted his eyes; he could not bear to look at it. Not a flower she had tended, not a rock upon which she had sat, but cried his loss and theirs to him. And within his heart was an aching pain, a dull, fierce longing which threatened to drive him mad.

Indeed, the wonder is that he did not become insane; for his grief and agony burnt in a bosom unused to such emotions; and he was alone, without a human voice to utter one word of consolation or sympathy. It is hard to conceive such a situation, and no description can do justice to its terrible despair. For days he scarcely ate; for nights he lay awake, his disordered mind dwelling upon her image, and calling up her face and form. In the silence of the night he would hear her voice, now soft and dreamy, now rippling with girlish merriment and innocent happiness. He did not know that he loved her, as we understand love, but he knew that she had taken with her all joy in life, all desire to live.

Sometimes he tried to hope, to tell himself that the boat had been blown safely out to sea, and that she had been picked up by a passing vessel; but he knew that the chances

were against such a rescue, that the boat could not live in such a sea, and that any vessel would give a wide berth to the island in such a storm.

Once or twice he half resolved to put an end to the life which his great loss had made almost intolerable; but something held him back, even as he stood on the edge of the cliff and gazed down wistfully, despairfully. If she was dead, she might be somewhere where she could still see him, and he knew that she would be grieved if he killed himself. Only this thought kept him from suicide.

Presently, as the days wore on, the necessities of life began to take hold of him. He had neglected his work, everything, and the signs of the neglect reproached him on all sides. For one thing, the flowers she had reared could not be allowed to die, the animals she had loved must be fed, if only for the sake of her memory. So he returned to his daily drudgery; but, ah! with what a different spirit to that with which, while she was by his side, he had gone about his daily work! Her presence had lightened his toil, had sweetened his existence; but now what was there to work for?

As the days passed, the sharpness of his agony grew less acute, but his longing for her never ceased to oppress him like a dull physical pain. His once quick, firm step became slow and dragging; his head drooped upon his breast; he gazed before him vacantly and absently; he did his work mechanically.

Even the sportsman's instinct, which stands so many strains, seemed to have died within him, and one day he stood in the pine wood, leaning on his gun, and watching a great bear slink past him, without the least desire to shoot it. A great part of his time he sat on the beach, his elbows on his knees, his eyes fixed on the sea, which now he hated with an intense and bitter hate; for had it not robbed him of all that had made life precious?

By this time the rainy season had set in; but he neglected his usual preparation and precautions, and allowed the rain to drift into his hut, and went about most of the time wet through. He grew thin and wan and haggard, and the marvellous strength was slowly deserting him; he felt tired after an hour's fishing, and the arm with which he used to fell trees and haul lumber so easily dropped to his side wearily if he exerted himself in the old and familiar way.

Presently outraged Nature became indignant and resentful. One day he was taken with a shaking fit, and had scarcely strength enough to walk home, and for some days he lay in a kind of fever, during which he hoped that he was

going to die. Who knew? after death he might see her again. But he was too splendid a specimen of humanity to be snuffed out by a feverish cold, and he pulled through. But for some days he was too weak to walk, and one night, looking round absently, he saw the book from which Stella had taught him to read.

The pencil and paper which they had used in his schooling lay beside it, and he shook and shivered as he remembered how gentle and patient she had been with him, even while she had laughed at him; how her small hand had guided his.

With a groan he drew her letter—the letter she had written to him—from his pocket, and gazed at it with aching, bloodshot eyes.

The sight of the writing which the little hand had formed seemed to tear his heart in twain; his bosom heaved, and suddenly his eyes were blinded by a flood of tears. A man's tears are terrible at all times; how much the more terrible in this man who had been trained to the stoicism of the Indian!

But the outburst relieved him, and left him sad enough in all conscience, but strangely calm.

And he repeated the lines of the letter which he knew by heart:

"'I miss the island very much. . . . How kind and good you were to me! . . . I hope you are quite well and happy, and don't miss me very much; of course I want you to miss me a little; but not to be unhappy. I hope you will remember the promise when we parted, that you won't forget me . . . that you won't fall over the cliff, or be reckless in any way.'"

It was like a message from the dead; he could almost hear her speaking.

Then he was assailed by the dread that he might some time forget some word of the precious letter; and, moved by that dread, he resolved to continue his lessons, to learn to write, that he might always be able to read her letter.

His fit of weeping and this resolution probably saved his reason, if not his life. He opened the book and pored over it, and fell to work at his writing with feverish eagerness.

He slept better after this; for the mind had found a distraction, some relief from the perpetual brooding over his loss. And one day, as he went towards the beach, he looked, for the first time since Stella had gone, towards the hut. The storm had blown down one of the supports of rough wood of the verandah, and had torn a strip of shingle from the roof.

To him the place was a sacred temple of his lost Stella, and

his heart reproached him for his neglect. He went back and got his tools, and approached the hut—but very slowly; and outside the door he paused, trembling, as a devotee might tremble at a shrine too sacred to be entered; but at last he went in and stood still, looking round him with an aching heart.

The room seemed to cry out to him, "Stella! Stella!" He could almost fancy that he saw her standing by the table, or sitting in the chair, though he had never thus seen her in life.

Presently his eyes fell on the bed, and his trembling increased. He went up to it slowly, and sinking on his knees beside it, let his head fall upon the coverlet, which his lips kissed as one kisses the face of the beloved dead. The caress —the act of worship, if you will—calmed him, and he rose from his knees soothed and comforted.

With loving care he touched some articles belonging to her —a half-finished skirt upon which she had been at work; the needle and thread were still in it, as she had left them; the wide-brimmed hat she had made out of leaves, the book lying open on the table. He touched and kissed them and other relics; and presently he came across a small, flat tin box lying under the pillow at the head of her bed.

As he took this in his hand he remembered the last words of Stella's mother. He examined it with intense interest, but with nothing of vulgar curiosity. It was tied round with a thick piece of tape or braid and sealed at each side. It did not occur to him for a moment to break the seal. Of all the things belonging to her this was in his eyes the most sacred, and he would keep it intact while he lived. He looked round for some place in which to put it, and, seeing none to his liking, dug a small hole in a corner of the flooring of the hut and buried it there. If the box contained a secret, it belonged to the dead girl, and no one but she should ever learn it.

Then he went outside and set to work repairing the damage done by the storm, and it was the first work he had done, since his loss, with any heart in it. When it was finished he felt reluctant to leave the hut, for it seemed to him that the spirit of Stella lingered there; so he brought his blankets and other things from his own den in the tree and returned to his old quarters, and all that night he lay awake communing with the vision of the boy-girl who had gone and taken his heart with her.

From this time he worked hard at his reading and writing,

and though he made slow progress compared with that which is made under a tutor, he learnt to read with comparative ease, and to write in a stiff and boyish fashion; and the day he was able to read Stella's letter was almost a happy one for him. But "happy" is too big a word to use, for he never ceased to mourn and long for her.

The time was now approaching for the visit of the Indians who came to trade; but Rath, who had hitherto looked forward to their coming with the pleasant anticipation of a break in the monotonous life, now felt neither interest nor excitement, though, in an apathetic way, he overhauled his stock of skins and other articles of barter; but the time passed over and the Indians did not come. He was surprised, as they were usually punctual to their season; but he was indifferent. He grew nearly all the necessaries of life, and had a fairly good stock of ammunition, which was the principal thing he required of them.

Once or twice he had asked himself whether he should dig up any of the gold Stella and he had discovered; but, remembering what she had said, her warning that the island would be thronged with fortune-hunters if the presence of gold were known, he decided to keep the secret, especially as his pelts and seal-oil would get him all he required in exchange.

Winter was very near at hand; indeed, there had been a light fall of snow, when, one day as he was tramping through the wood in search of buck, he heard the distant sound of a gun. Concluding that the Indians were approaching, he went home and got his barter-stock ready and killed a goat for food for them; but the day passed and they did not put in an appearance. He lit a fire outside the hut—his father had never permitted the Indians to enter it—and sat up for them late into the night; but still they did not come, and, somewhat puzzled, he next morning took his gun and went to meet them.

The snow had fallen again during the night, and as he looked round, he thought how Stella would have admired the white tracery with which the scene was covered; for at all times his mind dwelt upon her. As he went, he gave the peculiar call with which the Indians are familiar; but no answer came, and after some hours of tramping, he was on the point of returning, when he heard the baying of wolves. The weird sound came fitfully through the snow-laden air, and he paused and leant on his gun and listened. The skin of the Vancouver wolf is valuable, and though he was not very keen

about it—there was nothing about which he was keen now—he turned and went back towards the sound.

As he approached, the baying was broken by the snarling which indicated that the pack was quarrelling over some prey, and moving more cautiously through the undergrowth, he came in sight of them. They were gathered round some object, fighting and snarling over it; and Rath, creeping nearer on his hands and knees with the gun ready, saw with amazement that it was a horse. He knelt on one knee, and raising his rifle, was about to mark the largest of the wolves, when he saw some of the pack leave the horse, and, with the peculiar, skulking move of the animal, make for another spot, as if they were going to attack some other object.

Rath lowered his gun without firing, and crept nearer, and, with a thrill of amazement and excitement, saw a man crouching behind a fallen tree, over which he was pointing a rifle. The wolves were seeking for him, crowding and pushing on one another, and snarling like curs, their reeking jaws apart, their long fangs glittering whitely. As they were close upon his natural barricade, the man fired, and the nearest wolf dropped; the others fell back for a moment, then recovering from their fright, sprang upon the fallen tree. Rath saw the man rise painfully to his feet, clutch his rifle, and swing it round; but in another instant he would have been overwhelmed and dragged down by the number of his assailants; but Rath's rifle was at his shoulder in a twinkling; he brought down the wolf that was nearest the man's throat, and, with a cry, sprang forward and rushed into their midst, striking at them with the butt-end of his gun.

They scattered like sheep, and joined by their fellows worrying the dead horse, slunk off through the wood like spectres. The man they had been attacking sank on to the fallen tree, and with trembling hand wiped the sweat from his face. He was white with exhaustion, his arm was bleeding through a rent in his sleeve torn by the fangs of one of the wolves; but he nodded to Rath with the smile which a brave man always finds possible even at his last moment.

"You turned up just in time, sir," he said, trying to speak calmly, but panting in spite of his effort. "Another moment, and those devils would have made a supper of me. It was a near thing."

Rath leant on his gun, and, with his wonted gravity and calmness, regarded in silence the man he had rescued.

"*Are you hurt?*" he asked at last.

The man rose, a little shakily, and shrugged his shoulders.

"No; I don't think so. One of the beasts touched my arm; but it's a mere scratch. I'm afraid they've done for my horse, though!" and he looked towards the dead animal and sighed. He was young and tall, and something in his face and voice prepossessed Rath in his favour.

"Better the horse than you," he said, in his unconsciously philosophical fashion.

The stranger smiled, though rather sadly.

"That's true enough," he responded, "though the horse was a good one, and I'm grieved to lose him. But it might have been worse, as you say. You have saved my life, sir."

"I'm glad," responded Rath in his curt way. "How did you come here? Where are you going?"

The stranger straightened himself, as a man does when so interrogated.

"I am from Victoria," he said; "as to where I was going —well, I'm not certain. The fact is, I lost my way—if I had a way; about which I am not sure. The fact is, I left Victoria in search of—well, adventure; and, by George! I've found it!" He laughed rather ruefully as he regarded his dead horse. "Are you a trapper?"

"Yes," replied Rath after a pause.

"You live near here?"

"Yes. You had better come with me," he added after a moment; for, incredible as it may seem, he was not overjoyed at the presence of this stranger. You see, the island was sacred to him and the memory of Stella, and he did not welcome the threatened intrusion.

"I shall be very glad," said the young fellow. "Is it far —your house, I mean—for I'll admit that I'm pretty nearly done. I haven't tasted food since yesterday, and this bout with those beasts has played the Harry with me."

"It is not far," said Rath, gravely. "I am sorry that I have nothing for you to eat; but there will be plenty for you presently."

"That's all right," said the stranger as they stepped out side by side, but slowly; for he was evidently near dead beat. "The sight of a fire and a square meal will be very grateful."

"Let me carry your gun," said Rath, and he took it from him.

"Is there a settlement near?" asked the stranger.

"A settlement? No," replied Rath.

"*No?* Then where are we going?" asked his companion, *with reasonable* surprise.

"To my hut," answered Rath, quietly.

"Oh—ah, yes, to your people," said the other.

"I have no people," said Rath. "I am alone—live alone."

The young man regarded him with amazement.

"Alone! In this waste?"

"Yes; quite alone," said Rath.

"Good Lord! It's like a second Robinson Crusoe," murmured the stranger.

Rath made no response to this comment, and they walked on in silenec until they reached the hut.

"Go in," said Rath, with natural courtesy. "I will get some supper ready. I have a goat killed, and will cook some of it."

The stranger leant against the end of the logs which supported the verandah.

"Thanks, very much," he said. "I wish I could express my gratitude. But I'm too astonished to express anything. Do you mean to say that you live—here—alone?"

"Yes," replied Rath, quietly. "Why not?"

"Oh, Lord! I don't know. But—but—how on earth do you manage it? Alone, quite alone?"

"Quite alone," replied Rath, as he turned the joint of goat on the gridiron.

The stranger stared, but said no more. Rath served up the meat, cooked to a nicety; and as the young man ate it, he said:

"We really ought to introduce ourselves. May I ask your name?"

"My name is Rath Rayne," said Rath.

"And mine is Edward Bryan," said the stranger.

CHAPTER XVIII.

WHILE they ate their supper the two young men, of course, regarded each other with interest and curiosity; masked on Edward's side by the courtesy of culture; open and candid, yet gravely dignified, on Rath's.

Rath liked the look of the man he had saved from the wolves—liked his frank and pleasant face, his ready smile, and the open and direct expression of his blue eyes. And Edward was singularly prepossessed in favour of this strange being, this modern Robinson Crusoe, who, though attired in the garb of a lumberman and trapper, had the bearing, the manner, and, above all, the voice of a gentleman.

That he should be living alone in this wild and, so to speak, unexplored place, seemed too romantic to be true. Edward had read of such cases, but had always relegated them to the region of fiction. He looked round the hut with frank and inoffensive curiosity.

"You have very comfortable diggings, Rayne," he said at last. "And—pardon me—there is a settled, substantial look about them, as if you had been here for some time."

"As long as I can remember," said Rath. "Why do you call me Rayne? My name is Rath."

Edward tried not to stare.

"Rath; certainly," he said at once. "And mine is Edward, you'll remember. And you have been here since—how long? But not alone, surely? Of course that's impossible."

"No; my father lived with me. He died some months ago."

"And there has been no one else—only you two?" said Bryan. "Forgive me; but I can't help feeling curious. You'll admit that your situation is an extraordinary one."

"Is it?" said Rath. Then, after a pause, he said, reluctantly: "There was some one else—two persons; but one is dead, and the other"—his voice grew low and hoarse—"has gone."

As he spoke he was glad he had put away the precious relics which Stella had left behind. They were hidden in a box beneath her bed, as if too sacred for even his own everyday gaze.

"And left you here alone! That was rather heartless, wasn't it? But perhaps you preferred to remain," added Edward, as Rath's face flushed, and he frowned heavily; for, all unwittingly, he had laid his hand upon Rath's still aching wound.

Rath nodded.

"Let me give you some more meat," he said, evading the question with the coolness and readiness of a man of the world, as Bryan noticed.

"Thank you. I was half famished. One more question, and my impertinent curiosity shall dry up. Are you too fond of your solitary state to accept a companion, or will you permit me to stay with you for a time? Of course, I don't propose a partnership," he went on, quickly. "I haven't the capital to enable me to do so; but I will be glad to work for my bed and board, as we say in old England."

Rath was silent for a moment, as he considered the proposal, then he said, gravely:

"You shall stay if you wish."

"Thanks," rejoined Edward, with frank satisfaction. "I'm very glad. May I smoke?" He took out his pipe and pouch, and handed the latter to Rath, who declined it; then, as he leant back and puffed with intense enjoyment at his blackened briar, Edward went on: "I ought to tell you something about myself. I'm the second son of Sir Gilbert Bryan; we live at a place called Shorn Court, near Ratton—but I don't suppose you ever heard of it."

"No," said Rath.

He was sitting with his head resting in his hand, his eyes fixed with grave attention on the speaker.

"No, I don't see how you could, seeing you have spent all your life here. Upon my word, I can't realise it, and it will take me days to do so. Well—I only tell you this by way of introduction—my governor is poor—poor for a baronet—and the estate's going, of course, to my brother. I have had to turn out in search of work. It's the fate of the second son, you know, and of course I've nothing to complain of."

He said this brightly enough, but he stifled a sigh all the same.

"There's no room in England for the likes of me, so I came out here. This is my second trip abroad, and I made so little out of the first that I don't think I should have come out again if—if it—it hadn't been for circumstances."

He was not able to stifle the sigh this time, and he took his pipe from his mouth and stared hard at it, as if his mind—and his heart—had flown off somewhere; as they had.

"Though I'm a 'varsity man—Oxford—I'm pretty ready with my hands, and I hope I shall be of some use to you. I'm a decent shot, I think, and I can ride a bit, though that doesn't count, as I see you don't keep horses—or I should have heard 'em—and I've lost my own—poor chap! I must go back for the saddle and bridle to-morrow, by the way. So there's my history, in a rambling fashion. I'm passing honest, as Hamlet says, and I think I'm capable of standing by a pal if he has need of me; and I'm not given to shirking my share of the work. Anyway, you can give me a trial, and if it doesn't pan out all right, why, you can then give me the sack."

Most of this was worse than Greek to Rath, but he understood the purport of it, and he held out his hand. He remembered how he and Stella had clasped hands on *their* bargain. Edward took the hand and shook it cordially, and there fell a silence upon the two young men; one of those

silences at which Rath was so extremely and surpassingly good. Presently he rose to throw another log on the fire, and Edward regarding him admiringly, said:

"What is your height, Rath?"

"I don't know," said Rath, with some surprise; and pausing, with the log in his hand.

"Six feet and a trifle over, I should think," said Bryan. "The air of this place must be extremely salubrious, for it has grown a fine specimen in you," he added, as he looked at Rath's powerful form. "I'd rather have you on my side in a row than on the other; but you are a bit too thin, aren't you?"

Rath nodded and glanced carelessly at his arm, upon which the muscles stood out like those on a greyhound.

"Yes; I've got thin lately," he said.

"And a little off colour, too, I should say," said Edward. "Excuse my noticing it; but I've some quinine in my pocket, and I should advise you to take a dose or two. Was it fever?"

"I suppose so," said Rath, gravely, as he thought of the weeks of agony he had endured.

He stirred the fire with his foot as he answered, and the wood started into a blaze and lit up his careworn face. Edward, who had still been regarding him with admiration and interest, started, and took his pipe from his mouth.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "What did you say your name was?"

"Rath Rayne," replied Rath; and Edward repeated it thoughtfully once or twice.

"No; I don't remember it. I don't think I've ever heard it before; and yet, just now, as you stood with the firelight full on your face, I could have sworn I'd seen you, or someone remarkably like you, before. Where do your people come from?"

"I don't know," replied Rath, quite simply, as if there was nothing extraordinary in his ignorance. "I don't know anything about them. My father never told me."

Edward was too courteous and discreet to remark upon this rather startling statement; and, after a pause, Rath said:

"Why do you ask?"

"Because I might have met, known, some of them. You see, England's not a very large place, and the gentry hold together pretty much, and generally know one another. Of course, my dear fellow, I know that you are a gentleman; a *blind man* could see that."

Rath nodded with rather staggering calmness.

"Yes, my father was a gentleman, and taught me to be one," he said, as if it were a matter of course.

"And I thought I might be able to trace the resemblance to someone I know," said Bryan.

Rath shook his head.

"I can't help you," he said, with his usual gravity. "I know nothing of the people to whom I and my father belong. It does not matter."

"Not in the least," Edward assented, promptly, and with a slight embarrassment; for it naturally occurred to him that this young giant's father must have had good—or, rather, bad—excuse for concealing his antecedents from his son. He at once changed the subject by remarking:

"I see you have some books here; and, by George! you need them in the long winter evenings."

"Yes. Won't you look at them?" said Rath; and he added, with his usual conscientiousness: "I am just learning to read."

To cover his surprise, Edward rose and took some of the volumes from the shelf.

"Been too busy to learn, I suppose?" he said, as casually as he could. "You've got some useful books here, though they are some of them pretty old and out of date. Oh! here's an old friend of mine!" he exclaimed, as he came to the work on heraldry. He turned it over and noticed, as Stella had done, that the fly-leaf, upon which the name of the owner is generally written, had been torn out. "Jolly interesting old book!" he said. "I've spent many a pleasant half hour over it. By George!" he broke off, looking up suddenly. "*Now* I know where I've seen someone like you! Did you ever hear the name of Ratton?"

Rath shook his head.

"No, never!" he replied.

Edward Bryan looked at the Ratton arms, which had caught his eye, and seemed puzzled for a moment; then he put the book aside and began to talk of his colonial experiences, and to ask questions as to Rath's work and pursuits.

The two young men sat up talking for some hours; indeed, until Edward Bryan began to nod in his chair, then they went to bed.

When he woke in the morning, Rath found that his new chum had already risen, and was busy making up the fire. Edward looked round at him and nodded.

"*Good-morning!*" he said, in his pleasant voice. "I got

up as quietly as I could, because you didn't seem to have had much of a night, and I didn't want to disturb you. I forgot to give you that dose of quinine last night; take it now; here it is. It will soon stop that talking in your sleep."

Rath looked up from the morsel of grey powder.

"Did I talk in my sleep?" he said, rather sternly. "What did I say?"

"'Pon my word, I was too sleepy to hear," replied Edward, lightly. "Whatever it was, it wasn't intended for my ears, you know, so I didn't trouble to listen."

"I beg your pardon," said Rath, gravely.

Rath was rather quiet during breakfast, for he was thinking of his late companion—Stella—at that and his other meals, but when he conducted Edward Bryan round the farm and clearing, he talked more freely, and the two men planned out their work.

Rath found that his new helpmate had only done himself justice in declaring that he could turn his hand to most things, and before many days had passed Edward Bryan's frankness and good temper won upon Rath's natural reserve. But not one word did he say of Stella, though his reticence rose from a reluctance to widen the wound which had not, and never would be, closed in his heart.

Edward Bryan, for his part, very soon grew fond of his strange companion, whose singular history and solitary life had a fascination for him. The two young men talked when they were working together, and in the long evenings, and Rath would listen with absorbed gravity to Bryan's stories of his home-life at Shorn Court, to descriptions of the father and mother who loved and were loved by him; but very often the two would sit and stare silently at the fire; and Rath would be dreaming of his lost Stella, and Edward would be dwelling upon Lady Mary, and wondering what was happening to her, and whether she had forgotten him; no, not forgotten him, for he knew that Mary was not one to forget the man who had won her heart.

One day Bryan had gone off in search of game, and Rath had remained at home sawing logs. He had finished work for the day, and was cooking the dinner when he heard Edward's step. He was back before his time, and Rath looked round to inquire the reason; but the question was checked upon his lips, and he regarded Edward in silence, for Bryan's face was white, his lips trembling, and his manner agitated.

"*Rath!*" he exclaimed, breathlessly, "I've—I've got

surprise for you. I have made a discovery, a wonderful discovery! Be prepared for a shock!"

"What is it?" asked Rath in his grave fashion.

Bryan flung himself into a chair, and, leaning his elbows on the table, stared at Rath as if he were looking through him.

"You know the hill behind the north cliff, Rath? Well, I was crouching there behind the scrub, waiting for some wild fowl to pass; my foot slipped and knocked out a piece of rock—stone. I picked it up absently, and—and, Rath, my boy, our fortune is made! It wasn't rock or gravel, but a nugget! *Gold, my boy, gold!*"

He let the nugget fall on the table with a thud, and pointing to it, regarded Rath with sparkling eyes.

"That's gold, Rath—gold! Do you hear? And there's plenty more of it—oceans! How on earth I've managed to keep my head, why I haven't gone stark staring mad, I don't know. I wanted to shout and—and jump! I'm afraid I did shout a bit, and I've come home walking on air. Don't you understand? Are you too astounded to speak? It's gold, I tell you, gold! Take it in your hand, examine it, weigh it! Isn't it a stunner? And there's more—more where that came from!"

Rath took up the nugget and looked at it absently. Then he laid it down again, and said, coolly:

"Yes, I know."

"You—know—knew!" gasped Edward Bryan, staring at him.

Rath nodded, and turned to his stew-pot again.

"Yes. We—I discovered it months ago," he said, quietly.

"You discovered it, and you said nothing about it!" exclaimed Edward. "Why on earth not?"

Rath was silent a moment.

"No, I was wrong. It was not I who found it, but one who is not here."

He turned his head away from the other man's sparkling, flashing, and eager eyes.

"No matter who discovered it, there's enough for both of us—enough for half a dozen men—enough to make millionaires of us! Oh, Rath!"

He gasped, and laughed almost hysterically; then he controlled himself, and stammered, apologetically:

"Look here, old fellow; I'm afraid you'll think I've taken leave of my senses, and am behaving like—like a school-girl; but—but, Rath, you don't know what this"—he touched the nugget—"means to me!"

Rath dished up the stew as carefully as usual, and looked at him gravely. Edward Bryan fondled the nugget in his hand, and glanced from it to Rath, and then back again, as if he could not keep his eyes from the precious lump.

Rath regarded him enquiringly.

"It—it means money, wealth," Edward went on, with terrible earnestness; "it means more than that; it means *happiness!* Rath, do you know why I left England—why I came out here to seek my fortune? It was not so much because I wanted money for itself—for myself. I could have found some work, however poorly paid, in England; but I wanted money—a lot of it, because—because I love a girl there, and—and I can't have her because I'm poor. I've never spoken of it to you; it was too—too sacred to speak of, even to you. Ah, Rath, you—you don't know what love is. You have lived here all alone, without a woman near you."

Rath did not start, but stood with the tin dish of stew in his hand, his eyes fixed, with a strange expression in them, upon Bryan's working face.

"You don't know—understand—realise—what a thing this love is! To long for, and—and want her—the girl you love—every hour and day and week of your life! To feel that if you don't get her, life isn't worth living! To think and dream and dwell upon her night and day— Oh, my God! Rath, it drives me mad not to be able to make you understand! You don't know—you have never loved—you don't know what it means!"

Rath set down the dish on the table and stood with knit brows, a strange look on his face as he listened.

"See here!" Edward went on. "This girl I love, she has been beyond my reach, just because I was poor. She—she—might have been forced—induced—to marry another man! Oh, my God! if I should be too late—too late! A man unworthy of her, a man my better in rank and wealth— No; he's not my better in wealth now, for there's enough of this to buy him ten times over! Oh, Rath! don't you understand that this gold means *happiness* to me; that, with it, I shall be able to marry the girl I love! *Love!*" he repeated, with frenzied emphasis. "Oh! I despair of making you, who have never loved, understand what I mean! See here, Rath, suppose—easy now, let me try hard to explain!—suppose there was a being in the world—a woman—one of the opposite sex, who was so dear to you that you couldn't bear to have her out of your sight; so dear and precious to you that every time she spoke or touched you—just in shaking hands, old chap!—you

thrilled all through you—oh! how can I explain?—and that you could get her to live with you always, to be by your side all through life till death, to be your companion, chum, day and night— Oh! it's no use; you can't understand!" he broke off, in despair.

But Rath was quicker than Bryan thought him. His face had grown white, his lips were twitching.

"I—I know!" he said, hoarsely. "Yes—that is how I felt!"

Bryan stared at him.

"What do you say? What are you talking about? I say, you can't understand. You have never been in love!"

Rath strode forward and laid his hand on Edward Bryan's shoulder in a grip like that of a steel vise.

"Silence!" he said; "I *do* understand. I—I—*know* now! Take the gold—go back to her—this girl you love. The gold will give her to you—while I—"

His hand relaxed its grip and fell limply to his side.

"Take it all," he said. "It is of no use to me!"

CHAPTER XIX.

"TAKE it all; it's of no use to me!" said Rath.

Edward regarded him earnestly and eagerly. He saw that there was something behind Rath's words—some mystery. Rath had sunk into his seat, his head leaning on his hand, his now favorite attitude; and his face was cold and almost stern.

Edward leant forward.

"Look here, Rath," he said, more calmly, "don't you be offended at what I'm going to say. The man who says that gold—money—is of no use to him, talks the most awful rot; there's not a man in the world to whom gold is not useful, indispensable."

"This is not the world," said Rath, quietly; "this is out of the world."

"True! But there's no reason for you to remain here, no reason why you shouldn't go into the world and mix with your fellows," argued Edward. "If you were—well, a savage, nothing better than the ordinary backwoodsman, lumberman, trapper, there might be some reason for your being satisfied with the island, for not caring to leave it or change your mode of life; but you are not a savage or ordinary trapper! Dash it all! my dear Rath, you are a gentleman, and you are out of your proper place here!"

Rath shook his head, unmoved, and served out a portion of the stew; but Edward would not be silenced.

"In addition to being a gentleman, you are young and strong, and—and have all your life before you. Rath, you don't know how good that life can be! You have lived here all your time, wresting from Nature your daily bread, fighting with her for dear life; you know nothing—forgive me, old man!—of the delights of civilization, of the joys which the world can give; the friendship of other men—the healthy amusements, the recreations of life! I grant you that in the world from which I come a poor man has a bad time of it, that he has to work as hard as we do here, and under less favourable circumstances; but you—we—should not be poor! 'Wealth beyond the dreams of avarice!' is a favourite expression in England; they use it there without understanding its full significance; but, by George! that's just what we should own! There's nothing we couldn't buy, nothing too high for us to aim at! We might be great, famous—oh! it's difficult to make you understand!"

Rath frowned thoughtfully.

"You said you wanted the gold because—because you could get the girl you loved," he remarked.

"Yes!" assented Edward, eagerly. "God knows that that is the only desire of my life, and the only thing I want the money for; but, Rath, forgive me!—you are young, as I said just now, and—well, they don't make many chaps of your stamp and with your phiz in England. Don't you think that you, too, would meet with some woman you could love, someone you would want for your own—your very own?"

Rath's face grew white and haggard, but he bent his head over his untouched plate and said nothing; and Edward went on, so absorbed in his argument that he did not notice these storm signs in the face of his chum.

"You don't know what love is, Rath! It's—it's the first, the greatest thing in life—it is, indeed! All things come second to it. It's the one thing which makes life worth living. To have someone to love, to worship, some woman who is the companion and the delight of one's life—! Ah, well—there! But, Rath, why shouldn't this happiness fall to your lot as well as to others—to mine? You can't tell! Come with me to England, and you will meet with some girl who will make you as happy as I shall be—if I get the woman I love. Come, Rath."

Rath rose, his worn face working.

"*Be silent!*" he said, almost inaudibly, so great was the

emotion with which he was battling. "I don't want to hear any more. I—I—"

He stopped suddenly, sank into his chair again, and covered his face with his hands.

Edward, aghast and wondering, went round to him, and laid a hand upon his shoulder.

"What have I said—done?" he asked, remorsefully. "Forgive me, Rath! My dear old man, I didn't mean to pain you, to hurt your feelings in any way. I won't say another word. And, look here!" he added, almost solemnly, "I've been forgetting all this time that the gold is yours and not mine! That I've no right to an ounce of it. You discovered it before I did, and it's on your land. Say no more, Rath. I'll give it up. I'm not the man to desert a friend, and I'll stay on here with you and say no more about the gold. Indeed, I'll try and forget it, though that will be precious hard; at any rate, I'll say no more about it unless you do."

This offer of renunciation and all it meant touched Rath to the heart. He held out his hand to Edward, and the two men exchanged a grasp in silence; then Rath raised his head.

"No," he said, quietly but firmly. "You shall take the gold and go back to England, Edward; but I will stop here. I'll tell you—yes, I'll tell you why."

He drew a long breath, and stared straight before him.

"I shouldn't be happy in this world of yours. I don't want to go there. There is nothing that I should care for. There is no woman I could love—"

He paused a moment. It cost him a great deal to speak of Stella, to tear his wound open; but after a moment or two of inward struggle, he went on:

"Before you came I had another friend—companion. It was a young girl. She drifted to the island with her mother. I didn't want them. I was sorry they had come, for my father had warned me against women—"

Edward murmured an exclamation of surprise; but Rath went on:

"But I could not help myself, though I tried; they had to stay. We made a bargain—she and I—that we would be friends—boy-friends; and—and she lived here in this hut, alone with her mother, and helped me with my work—"

He paused for a momnt; for as he spoke, the vision of Stella stood before him, the sweetness of the old life and companionship with her came back upon him and tortured him.

"We were together all day, friends, chums, as you and I

are. And life seemed different to what it had been before she came. I was happier, though I didn't know it. I liked to have her with me, to hear her singing while I was at work, to hear her laugh. We were together all the time, for her mother was ill and did not leave the hut. Then her mother died, and we were together alone."

Edward had returned to his chair and was listening breathlessly.

No novel he had ever read was more extraordinary than this story which was being told him by this haggard, despairing man, whom he had until this moment regarded as one absolutely without romance in his solitary life.

"Alone!" he echoed, half unconsciously.

Rath inclined his head.

"Yes; we only had each other. But it was enough for me. I think it was enough for her," he added, simply. "We were still happy. I don't think she even wanted to leave the island to go back to the world. We were happy. Then—then one day—"

He stopped and rose from his seat and went to the door, gazed out vacantly, and then came back.

"One day she left me to get some sea trout. A storm arose—the boat was blown out to sea, and—and I lost her."

"Lost her!" echoed Edward in a whisper. "Good God! She was drowned?"

Rath shook his head and shaded his eyes with his hand.

"I don't know," he said, hoarsely. "I fear so. It was a hurricane. I went out after her. I searched the bays along the coast. I lost her."

There was something so moving in the repetition of the simple, tragic words that the tears sprang to Edward Bryan's eyes. He rose and put his arm round Rath's shoulder, but wisely did not speak for a moment or two. At last he murmured huskily:

"My poor Rath! How you must have suffered! I know now why you are so pulled down, so gaunt and worn. Yes, you must have suffered! I think I should have gone mad, if I had been in your place."

"Perhaps I was mad," said Rath, simply. "I—I scarcely remember the days that followed after—after she had gone. I did not sleep, I could not eat. I did not know what was the matter, why I was so unhappy. I only knew that I wanted to die."

There was silence for a moment, then Edward said, as if to *himself:*

"And you never told her that you loved her, Rath?"

Rath started and looked up at him for an instant, then dropped his eyes, and his hand, that lay clasped on the table, shook.

"That—I— Did I love her—love her as you love this girl in England?" He was silent while Edward looked at him. "No; I did—did not tell her. I did not know until she had gone; how should I?"

Edward paced up and down. Here was an experience, a case, absolutely unique. This man had so loved a girl that her loss had almost deprived him of reason, had reduced him to a gaunt skeleton, had—for a time, at any rate—robbed him of youth and strength. And he did not know that he had loved her! It seemed incredible, and yet Edward could understand it.

The recital of the tragedy moved him to such an extent that for some time he could not speak, could only pace up and down.

Presently he flung himself into his chair, and leant across the table.

"Rath, my heart aches for you. I know what you feel. Great Heaven! should I not know? And you never spoke to her—told her? She never told you—let you see?"

Rath shook his head.

"I don't think she knew any more than I did," he said, with the same impressive simplicity.

Edward tried not to stare at him, but he could not keep his eyes from the face of this sorrow-stricken friend whose story was the most touching, the most tragic he had ever heard.

"What—what was her name, Rath?" he asked, presently.

"Stella—Stella Mordaunt," replied Rath, speaking her name in a kind of hushed whisper, as if it were sacred, as indeed it was to him.

"Where did she come from?"

Rath shook his head.

"I don't know—from London, England."

"Is that all you know?"

"Yes."

Rath thought of the tin box, but of course said nothing about it. That was Stella's secret, not his.

Edward got up and fell to pacing again.

"*See here,* Rath," he said, "God knows I don't want to *raise any false hopes;* but you can't be sure that she was *drowned. The boat* may—I say *may*—have been sighted and

picked up by a passing vessel! She may have been saved, and may be alive now!"

Rath quivered as if he had been struck, and the blood rushed to his face, then left it pale again.

"The storm was too great; no vessels have ever come within sight of this part of the island."

"*Have* ever—yes; but they might," said Edward. "There is just the chance. You didn't find the boat—it was not washed ashore. Rath, for all you know, she may be alive at this moment."

Rath rose, gripping the table, his breath coming painfully. The thought of Stella alive sent the blood coursing through his veins like quicksilver.

"It is impossible!" he gasped; but his eyes glowed with a light Edward had not seen in them before.

"No, not impossible—improbable, if you like; but while there is just the mere possibility there is hope. She may have been picked up, may at this moment be on her way to England. As a rich man, nothing would be easier than for you to search for her and find her—"

He stopped, for Rath's agitation, and his struggle to suppress it, were painful to witness.

"My dear old man, you have given way to despair, and it was killing you by inches. I know the meaning of the expression in your face, in your eyes. It was the look of the man who has lost all interest in life. If you had been fighting the wolves instead of me, you wouldn't have fought very long, or very hard, I'm afraid—that day you found me and saved my life."

"No, I shouldn't have cared if they had dragged me down. I didn't want to live; but now—"

He looked round with a new expression in his face, an expression of wild hope, of feverish restlessness.

"Now you've something to live for, though it may be only a chance," said Edward. "And something tells me that there is more than that in it. There have been instances on record of people who have been saved in more perilous situations than hers. And if she was saved, do you think she isn't mourning for you? Don't you think she is wearing her heart out for you, from whom she was torn?"

Rath held up his hand.

"Don't say any more!" he panted. "I—I can't bear to think of her suffering as I suffered. See! you have brought me to think of her as still living, and I want to find her!"

His eyes flashed towards the door as if he were about to start in quest of Stella that moment.

"When can we start? How can we go?"

Edward laid a hand upon his shoulder and soothed him.

"Easy, old man! There's only a chance, remember, and we can't go just yet. For one thing, we can't go as we are —poor and of no account. You want money for this search of yours; indeed, if you found her you might want money just as I do. We must get some of the gold, must arm ourselves in the most effectual way nowadays—by filling our pockets. With money a man can do almost anything—"

"Except bring the dead to life," said poor Rath, his despair sweeping back upon him with a rush.

Edward Bryan proved himself a good and patient friend that night; for he encouraged while he soothed Rath, loosed on a sea of conflicting emotions, tossed one moment on a wave of hope to sink the next with one of despair.

Neither man could sleep that night, and when Edward woke from an uneasy doze in the morning, he found Rath outside the hut surrounded by spades and picks and sundry other tools which he had collected. He was as grave as usual, but his feverish restlessness showed itself in his flashing eyes and his sharp and abrupt speech and movements.

"Let us begin at once," he said.

"After breakfast," said Edward; but Rath shook his head impatiently.

"I could not eat," he said.

But Edward, with a laugh, dragged him into the hut and forced him into a chair.

"My dear Rath, take a tip from a man who has played the game before, though unsuccessfully. Gold digging can't be done on an empty stomach, believe me. It's the sternest, grimmest work in the world; it tries a man's muscles, and his hand and his heart; there's no part of him that it doesn't take toil of, and only the man who feeds well can hope to stand the strain. Didn't you see how the mere discovery played the devil with me yesterday? Very well, then, you can imagine what the actual digging for the stuff means. Eat your breakfast, for, by the living jingo! I won't move a step until you have."

Rath, in his new frenzy, glared at him, then with a sigh of resignation made some kind of a breakfast. Then Edward selected the most useful of the tools, slung a canvas bag over his shoulder, and they set forth in quest of the bright yellow

metal for which men every day, and all day long, willingly sacrifice their honour, their happiness, their lives.

On their way, Rath told Edward of the finding of the skeleton, and Edward grew grave and thoughtful.

"That might have been my fate, even if I had escaped the wolves, if you had not been here, Rath," he said. "Whatever happens, I can never forget that you saved my life, that but for you I should never have had the chance of winning the girl I love. They say, nowadays, that there is no such thing as Providence; but when you come to think of the way you and I have been brought together, neither of us, I fancy, would like to go as far as that. Here is the place where I found the nugget," he broke off, eagerly.

Rath, scarcely less eager himself now, nodded.

"Wait," he said, as Edward began picking at the gravel furiously, and Rath dug up the nuggets he had buried the day Stella and he were on the spot.

Edward watched him turn the great nuggets out, watched him with scarcely suppressed excitement.

"My dear Rath, there's a small fortune there already!" he exclaimed. "Hurrah! It's an El Dorado, that's what it is!" he shouted, as he collected the nuggets into a little, but precious heap. "Now, let us pick out the old bed of the stream, for that is exactly what it is. In all my experience, I have never seen easier gold digging. It is a veritable Tom Tiddler's ground. Good Heaven! if the news of this find were to get abroad, we should have the population of an English town here in a week's time!"

Rath, who was already hard at work dragging down the auriferous gravel with his pick, looked over his shoulder with a gleam of ferocity in his eyes.

"This is ours," he muttered, with a new note in his voice. "*Ours!* And if any man—"

He did not finish the sentence; but, as if ashamed of his sudden fury, fell to work again.

They toiled like men working against time, like men working for their lives, for their souls' salvation. Cold as it was, the fever in their veins made their blood hot, and presently they slipped off their shirts, and though they were naked to their waists, they perspired like stokers on an Atlantic liner.

Edward Bryan had brought some dinner in the bottom of his sack, but they felt neither hunger nor thirst until the light began to fail and set that day's limit to their feverish toil. Then they straightened their aching backs, and, sweating and panting, looked down at the nuggets and dust at their feet.

And as they ate the cold goat and bread, and drank from the mountain rill, their eyes still dwelt fondly upon the pile; for upon the best of men, the noblest, the gentlest, the yellow metal asserts its fatal fascination and influence. And yet each man was working, not for the ease and luxury which the gold could purchase, but for that against which ease and luxury count as nothing—the girl he loved. Rath, with every stroke of the pick, every lift of the spade, thought of Stella, who might be living, whom he might find; and Edward's arm was strengthened by the hope of winning Mary.

Both men worked their hardest, but Rath's energy and strength amazed Bryan.

"You work like a Trojan, and yet you're nothing but skin and bone, Rath," he said. "You must have been as strong as a giant when you were fit."

Rath smiled grimly.

"I could have pulled up that tree by the roots," he said, glancing at a sapling. "But that was when—when Stella was here. Now!" and he looked at his wasted arm upon which the muscles stood out upon the bone like those of a greyhound.

"Courage!" said Edward, cheerily. "It will come back now that you have something to work for. But you mustn't overdo it, Rath."

There was good cause for the sensible caution; for when they had buried that day's treasure and dragged themselves home, Rath was too overtired to sleep; and in the middle of the night, Edward, waking, found his companion's bed empty. Much alarmed, he went out into the night, and discovered Rath standing on the beach, his arms stretched out towards the sea, his eyes wide open like those of a somnambulist.

"Stella! Stella!" Edward heard him cry in an agony of entreaty. "Stella, I am coming!"

With difficulty Edward drew him back to the hut, and induced him to lie down again.

CHAPTER XX.

THOUGH Stella strained very muscle in her efforts to work the boat back to the island wtih her single oar, she made no headway; the wind was too strong for her, and drove her before it like a cork; and presently the storm raged so furiously and rocked the boat so violently that she could not keep her footing, and was compelled to ship the oar and sink on to the thwart helpless and exhausted.

But though she was in such terrible straits, she did not give in.

Most girls would have been half dead with terror; but Stella was composed of sterner stuff than her sex are usually made of, and she had been living the kind of life that hardens the muscles and steels the nerves. She had been the constant companion of a man who did not know what fear was, and she had learnt, perhaps unconsciously, a contempt for cowardice—unless it was in the presence of a wild animal—and a desire to emulate Rath's calm, cool courage.

So, breathlessly, she sat and waited, hoping that the storm would soon abate, and buoyed up with the conviction that Rath would come in his canoe to her rescue.

But the storm held on, and the boat, tossing on the mountainous waves, was blown farther out to sea; and presently, as she grew chilled by the rain and half dazed by the motion of the boat, her heart began to fail her.

If Rath had been with her, she would not have known fear; but she was alone—alone, a mere speck on the vast ocean whose waves threatened to engulf her at every moment; and as the awful solitude pressed upon her, and she realised that Rath might not be able to come out to her, the sense of her loss struck her like the stab of a knife, and with a cry of "Rath! Rath!" she covered her face with her hands to shut out the sight of the storm.

And even at that moment it was not the dread of death that terrified her, but the loss of Rath, and the thought of all that he must be suffering on her account. Every fibre of her being ached for him. She felt that if he were there by her side, she could face the worst, and meet death, if die they must, with gratitude; but to be tossing on these hideous waves, without Rath to cheer and encourage her, added to the terror and misery which had now got fast hold on her.

She had felt her mother's death keenly, had mourned for her as deeply as a tender-hearted girl could mourn; but this feeling of bereavement was even more intense than that which had overwhelmed her on the loss of her mother; and in the howling of the wind and the fierce beating of the rain came the revelation that Rath was dearer to her than life itself.

How long the storm lasted, how many hours she crouched, half deafened by the roar of the elements, she did not know; but after awhile the wind lessened somewhat, the rocking of the boat became less violent, and the rain ceased.

She rose trembling to her feet, caught up the oar, and tried

to scull towards the land; but fate seemed against her; after two or three minutes of struggle, the oar broke in her hand.

With a cry of despair, she sank down again, and clasping her hands, gazed at the waste of sea with vacant eyes.

The storm cleared, but presently a haze crept over the horizon, and before long a dense fog surrounded her.

The wind dropped, and the boat seemed motionless; but it was still drifting, and drifting farther from the land—and Rath—every moment.

The fog was more depressing than the hurricane of wind and rain; and as she sat and shivered with the cold she became almost unconscious from exhaustion and want of food. A dreamy apathy took possession of her, and she lay back, her arms hanging limply at her side, small incidents of her life on the island with Rath passing like a panorama across her mind.

She recalled the day she had been washed ashore in this same boat, Rath's misapprehension of her sex, their strange bargain; how honourably he had carried out his part of the singular contract; how tender and good he had been with her! How patiently he had borne with her whims and caprices and temper! He had worked for her, taken care of her, watched over her as surely no other man had ever done for any other girl! And how ungrateful she had sometimes been! She remembered how he had risked his life over the cliffs to get her the flowers she fancied; how he had taken her in his arms and kissed her when her mother had died.

And at this remembrance of his tenderness and pity, the tears welled to her eyes and rolled unheeded down her cheeks. Oh! if she could but get back to him, if she could but see him, if it were only for a moment, to tell him how grateful she was, how much she—loved him! It was the despair of love, not the dread of death, that held her in thrall as the boat drifted through the fog which closed round her like a thick white blanket; and her one prayer was, not that she might be rescued, but that she might be restored to Rath, to the old life by his side, in which she knew now she had been the happiest of girls. Once, as she grew weaker, and her heavy lids drooped like lead over her tired eyes, she slowly and painfully slid her hand into her bosom, and took out a few faded flowers tied together with a piece of cotton.

They were the flowers Rath had risked his life for, the flowers she had found lying beneath him under the cliff, and she had hidden them from him, and carried them in her bosom ever since. She raised them to her lips and kissed

them now; it was all she had of Rath, and they were precious to her and comforted her even in that supreme moment. As she restored them to their hiding-place, she murmured:

"Good-bye, Rath; good-bye, dear, dear Rath!"

Her eyes closed, and she fell back, one hand pressed on her bosom where the flowers lay.

She was unconscious for some while. When she came to, slowly and painfully, the fog had lifted and the sea was rippled by a gentle breeze. She slowly raised herself on one arm —she was too weak to sit up—and gazed vacantly over the ocean. She was almost sorry that she was still alive, for with the return of consciousness the remembrance of Rath, the acute agony of her longing for him, came rushing back upon her; and the awful solitude, the terrible loneliness overwhelmed her. Then, as she lay there, a new dread, a fresh misery tortured her. Rath would be sure to try and rescue her; the canoe could not have lived in the storm through which, by a miracle, the boat had passed; he was, in all probability, drowned. If Rath was dead, then only death remained for her to long for. She closed her eyes and prayed that it might come quickly, that she might not linger through many more such hours as those through which she had suffered.

But Death does not come when we call upon him; he chooses his own time; and, with a sigh, she opened her eyes again, slowly, reluctantly. As she did so, she saw something white in the distance.

It was like a cloud on the sea-line; but while she gazed at it apathetically, she knew that it was not a cloud. Presently the vague fleecy whiteness took the shape of sails.

For a moment her heart leapt with the instinct of self-preservation; but it sank again. The vessel, if vessel it were, might not see her; and if it did, and came down upon her, Rath was not on board, and what was the use of life without Rath? But after a moment or two she began to realise that if she were rescued she might get back to the island; and struggling to her feet, she tied her handkerchief to the broken oar and waved it.

She tried to call out, though no sound she could make would have reached the vessel; but her voice failed her, and, after a minute or two, her strength also; so that she could not hold up the oar. But she stuck it in the mast-hole and then dropped back, panting with her weakness. She closed her eyes, resolved not to open them till she had counted a hun-

dred, for they ached with the intensity of her gaze, the mingled hope and dread.

When she looked again, a cry of despair rose from her white lips. The sails, if sails they were, had disappeared, the sea was once more a hideous blank. She must have become half unconscious again, for it seemed to her that only a few minutes had passed when, vaguely and dimly, she heard the sound of voices near her. She knelt and clung to the edge of the boat, and saw a yacht bearing down upon her.

The white sails were all set, and it looked like a huge swan breasting the green waves, and in her dazed condition she was more sensible of its beauty than the fact that it was coming to save her.

Presently an order was shouted from the deck, the sails slid down as if by magic, the vessel slackened, and came floating beside the boat. Stella looked up with heavy eyes, and saw that the side of the yacht was lined with faces, that men were running to and fro in anxious excitement, and then she heard a voice exclaim:

"By Heaven! it's a woman—a girl! Quick with that rope! Take care!"

A rope with a grappling-iron was thrown and caught the boat, and the next instant a young man had leapt into it, and was supporting Stella in his arms.

A cheer rose from the crew, a ladder was lowered, and she was borne on deck.

Two days afterwards, when she opened her eyes and struggled half reluctantly with returning intelligence, she found herself lying in a berth in a luxurious state-room. A voice murmured, sweetly:

"Oh, I am so glad! Are you better?" And she saw a fair-haired girl bending over her.

"Where am I? Where—where is Rath?" asked Stella, feebly, yet half wildly.

She tried to sit up; but the girl beside her gently forced her down again.

"You are all right, dear," she said, soothingly, pityingly. "You are on board the 'Kingfisher,' my brother's yacht—amongst friends. Can you hear me? Are you quite conscious?"—for Stella gazed at her vacantly for a moment or two; then, as she realised that this was not the island, that Rath was not here, she closed her eyes again and fell back and sighed.

There was a knock at the door, and the young man who *had leapt into the boat* looked in.

"How goes it, Cis?" he asked in a hushed voice.

The young lady nodded, and smiled with infinite satisfaction.

"She has come to; but she is scarcely conscious yet, poor girl!"

He stood in the door-way and looked towards the berth anxiously.

He was a handsome young fellow, almost as fair as his sister, but, unlike her, with a bronzed face and bright eyes that were eloquent of health and strength. He was not above the average height, but so well made that his slight figure, in its white yachting kit, did not seem short or undersized.

"Poor girl!" he echoed. "Anything I can do, Cis?"

His sister smiled again. He had asked the same question a hundred times during the last two days.

"No, nothing, Cecil," she answered in the words she had used as many times.

"Well, call me if I can do anything," he said.

Stella heard all this vaguely, and with a kind of indifference; but presently she looked round again.

"Have I been—ill long?"

"Two days, dear," said the young lady. "And we have been so anxious! Some day, when you are quite well and strong, you shall tell us how you came to be in that boat. But you must not think of it now," she added, quickly, as Stella shuddered. "We are all so anxious—my brother and I, and, indeed, all the men, that you should get well, that you must try and do so for our sakes," she went on; for she was alarmed by Stella's weakness and apathy, and was anxious to arouse her interest. "I can not tell you how glad and grateful we are that we lost our reckoning, and—and saw you! You must take some of this beef tea, and try and sleep, dear."

Stella sat up and took a little of the beef tea. She was too weak to hold the spoon, and her nurse had to feed her.

"That's right. You will soon be better now," said the fair-haired girl, with tears in her eyes.

"You are very good to me," said Stella, feebly. "Will you tell me the name of the ship again? I have forgotten already."

"The 'Kingfisher,'" said the lady. "It belongs to my brother Cecil—Lord Lisle. That was he who was here just now. My name is Cecilia. Will you tell me yours?"

"Stella Mordaunt," replied Stella; then she pushed the hair from her forehead, and looked at her companion with

sudden and feverish eagerness. "Where—where are we going?" she asked.

"To England," replied Lady Cecilia.

Stella uttered a faint cry of dismay.

"To England? Oh, no, no! I want to go back to the island!" she wailed, tears welling to her eyes. "I must go back! Indeed, indeed, I must!"

CHAPTER XXI.

"No, no; say nothing! I will wait!" Ralph stammered as he led Lady Mary back to the ball-room.

Mary answered not a word; indeed, she could not speak for the painful beating of her heart. She was a girl still, fresh from school, and a proposal from any man she did not love would have agitated her; but that Ralph, the earl, should tell her that he loved her and ask her to be his wife, and at the very moment Edward's letter was hidden in her hand, was nothing less than terrible.

The man to whom she was engaged for the next dance came up as she and Ralph entered the room, and Ralph, with a bow, resigned her to him.

For a space he stood looking round the brilliant scene vacantly, then he turned and went to a small room at the back of the hall which he had had furnished as a kind of "den."

He locked the door, and going to a side-board, he got some brandy, and drank a wine-glassful.

The spirit steadied him a little; and he needed steadying, for his hand was shaking and his head was in a whirl, and he could scarcely realise what he had done.

The old-fashioned villain of the novel and the melodrama, who calmly and coolly sits down and plans out a scheme of villainy is a very rare bird indeed, and seldom found in real life; which is a pity—for the novelist and dramatist. As a matter of fact, such men as Ralph Ratton are quite as much the creatures of impulse as good men; and Ralph had acted on impulse in telling Lady Mary that he loved her and asking her to be his wife. It was the excitement of his success; the dancing—and the champagne—that had impelled him to the rash act.

Surrounded by his titled and aristocratic guests—some of the least worthy had flattered and almost paid court to him—with the music singing in his ears, the scent of the flowers stealing over his senses, he had forgotten that though

he was the Earl of Ratton, he was the husband of Nita, the music-hall *artiste;* and the sight of Lady Mary in all her fresh, girlish beauty, the fascination of her refinement and girlish charm had helped him still farther to forget that dismal fact.

But he remembered it now, as he sat fingering the brandy glass and staring moodily at the carpet.

He was already married, and he had asked Lady Mary to be his wife; had proposed to her! Had he been mad for the moment? Yes, that was it, he must have lost his head for the time being. But the thing was done now. It was true that she had refused him, and for an instant or two he felt relieved. There was no great harm done. She had not only refused him, but promised not to say anything of his proposal; and he knew that she would keep her promise.

But after awhile the feeling of relief gave place to one of disappointment. The one thing a man finds it difficult to get is just the thing he wants; and Ralph wanted Lady Mary all the more badly for her refusal.

It seemed to him as he sat there and listened to the music floating faintly from the ball-room that nothing of all he possessed would be of any value to him if he could not get her.

"What's the use of being an earl and owning all this property, if I'm doomed to be a bachelor, to live alone, all my life!" he muttered. "I might just as well be a common, ordinary person; in fact, I should be a deuced sight happier. And everybody will expect me to marry. I ought to marry, and in my own sphere. How beautiful she is! She's the loveliest woman I ever saw!"

He refilled his glass and drank the contents slowly, and as the brandy sent its insidious glow through his frame and mounted to his brain, his evil courage mounted also.

"Who knows anything about—about Nita?" he mused. "No one; and no one is likely to know. She hasn't found me all these months, and it's very improbable that she will ever find me. Perhaps—perhaps she's dead, or she may marry again; nothing more likely. She's a good-looking girl, and—and the sort of people she associates with aren't too particular in asking questions where they take a fancy. It's likely enough she's given me up for good, and taken up with somebody else. Anyhow, I'll—yes, I'll risk it," he wound up with an oath, as he filled the glass for the third time. "Lady Mary's worth taking some risk for. With her for my wife—"

He gazed before him with half-closed eyes, and sank into a

delicious reverie. With such men as Ralph, passion takes the place of love, and there could be no question of his passionate desire for Lady Mary.

"But I must go cautiously," he uttered. "She's refused me; seemed as if she didn't care for me. But perhaps she was only startled, or it's the proper way for ladies of her high class to receive a proposal. Her father would be on my side. He thinks no end of me, and wouldn't object to me as a son-in-law. And, d—n it! I'm a good match for any of them—the best of them!"

He rose and went to the fire-place, and gazed at himself in the Venetian mirror.

"I'm not so bad-looking, either; but the strongest thing in my favour is that I'm the Earl of Ratton and worth a million. By George! she ought to have jumped at me. Why didn't she? There can't be anything between her and that conceited, self-satisfied beast, Edward Bryan?"

He scowled at his reflected face, then seeing how hideous the scowl made him, he forced a smile, and went back to the ball-room with it still on his face.

The dance was drawing to a conclusion, and some of the guests were already preparing for leaving. They came up to him to say good-night, or, rather, good-morning, and they one and all congratulated him on the success of his entertainment.

"You have done the thing very well, Lord Ratton, and we have had a delightful time," said the young duchess. "It has been quite Londonish in its splendour and its completeness; and I am quite sure we are all very grateful to you."

Ralph bent over the small ducal hand and murmured appropriate acknowledgments of her grace's graciousness; but he was watching, out of the corners of his eyes, for Lady Mary.

She came up presently on her father's arm.

"Sorry to go so early, Ratton," said Lord Hatherley, genially; "though, by Jove! it's late enough! But Mary's rather tired; been dancing too much, I expect, and she's not as used to it as some of the London belles who are here to-night. You have had a tremendous success, tremendous! But I knew you would!"

Ralph glanced at Lady Mary under half-closed lids.

"I hope Lady Mary has enjoyed it, and that she is not overtired," he said.

Mary stood with downcast eyes; but she raised them for a moment and looked at him gravely as she thanked him and wished him good-night.

When she and her father got into their carriage, she leant back and folded her hands over her bosom, upon which lay Edward Bryan's letter to his mother, and closed her eyes. Her head was still in a whirl, and Ralph's words were still ringing like a strain of discord in her ears. His proposal had seemed to her like an insult, like an outrage; but she told herself that she had no right to so consider it.

Why should she be angry or resentful? He did not know that she had already given her heart to Edward Bryan, and not knowing it, he was within his right in telling her that he loved her, and asking her to be his wife.

But though she reproached herself for her angry and resentful feeling against Ralph, the earl—had he not saved her life?—she shuddered as she thought of him.

All unconscious of her feelings, her father commenced to sing Ralph's praises.

"What a delightful evening! What a man!" he exclaimed. "By George! the county won't forget this ball; they'll remember it for years to come! And how well Ralph" —he called him "Ralph" now—"carried it off. He did the honours splendidly. That's where birth and breeding come in, Molly. Here is this young fellow—only come into his own a few months—coming out of a somewhat obscure, and I've no doubt somewhat squalid past, and at once he fits into his proper niche and takes his proper place in society. I must say I admire the way in which Ralph carries his honours. One would not have been impressed if he had been—well, loud and effusive; but you see that he carried himself and behaved as one in his position should behave. Say what you will, there is some mysterious power, some—er—instinct in good birth which enables a man to face and overcome all difficulties."

Mary did not respond. Edward's letter was lying like a sentient thing on her bosom.

"This affair must have cost a very large sum," went on Lord Hatherley, in the way men of his age have a habit of doing, communing with themselves rather than addressing the listener. "A tremendous success; but it does not matter; he is very rich and will not feel it. He looked very well tonight, don't you think? I don't think there was a handsomer man in the room; do you, Molly?"

"I—I don't know. I didn't notice," said poor Mary, upon whom this laudation of Ralph the earl jarred unpleasantly.

Lord Hatherley sighed.

"Lucky young beggar!" he said, musingly. He was thinking that the girl whom Ralph should choose for his wife would also be lucky. She would be a countess, and richer, even richer than most noblewomen. It was only natural he should think of Mary. Ralph had saved her life; he was always very attentive to her, was always running in to see them. The Hatherley estates would go away from Mary to the young boy at Eton. It was only natural that the fond father should be anxious for his beloved daughter's future, and reflect how safe and even brilliant it would be, if—if—she were to become Ralph's wife. But he said nothing. He was the last man in the world to hint of his half-formed wish to Mary; he said nothing, but the wish grew and grew as the carriage travelled the short distance. If he had known that Ralph had proposed and Mary had refused him, Lord Hatherley would not have put any pressure on her; for he held that love was sacred, and marriage something more than a mercenary contract.

He kissed her more tenderly than usual as she wished him good-night, and Mary clung to him for an instant with a mute, appealing embrace, her eyes filling with tears which she hid from him.

She went straight to her room, and when her maid had undressed her and brushed her hair, Mary took out Edward's letter. She pressed it to her lips before reading it, and she read it slowly, for it was too precious to hurry over.

It was a cheerful letter—if Edward Bryan had been writing on the eve of execution he would not have made any moan; but it told no story of success, and was not by any means sanguine.

"There are no openings here," he said. "The towns are too crowded, and the opportunities of making a fortune are not so numerous as they were. Every man one meets is on the same lay—excuse the slang, mother—and there aren't fortunes enough in this part to go round. So I am going to make a move. I have bought a good horse, and am going into the wilds on a kind of solitary prospecting. Don't be alarmed if you don't hear from me as regularly as you have done; there are no post-offices where I am going, and I may not be able to send you a letter for some time. When you see Mary next, give her this letter, and—no, I mustn't send *her my love.* But she knows—she knows! And when you *write, tell me everything* you can about her. The smallest, *most trifling detail*—how she looks, what she wears, where

she is going, what she is doing—will be precious to me. I can see her now—but when do I not see her?"

Mary's face flushed, and her heart throbbed with love as she read these simple but eloquent words. Marry Ralph the earl! She almost laughed at the idea. There was only one man in the world she would marry, and if she could not marry him, then she would die an old maid!

If only Edward could have heard her, seen the divine light in her eyes as she murmured this vow, how light his heart would have been as he started off for his solitary expedition —the expedition on which he was fated to meet Rath, the hermit of the island.

For some time Ralph the earl kept away from Hatherley. It would be well to give Lady Mary time not only to recover from the shock of his sudden proposal, but to think it over. And his time was fully occupied; invitations poured in upon him, and he was booked for a number of dinners and entertainments, for he was now in great request. The magnificent affair at the Hall had raised him in the estimation of the county people, and they were now quite ready to welcome him as one of themselves. Here and there was a man or a woman who did not quite "take to" the new earl; but they could give no reason for their distrust, and the majority voted him a good fellow, and were loud in their praises.

The sporting section grew louder still when the hunting season commenced, and Ralph, having subscribed most liberally to the hounds, put in an appearance at the first meet on a good-looking but particularly safe horse. He was not in the first flight, it is true, but he did fairly well, and carried himself modestly. He had expected and hoped to see Mary at the meet, but she was not out that day.

"Mary has been troubled with a headache lately," said Lord Hatherley, as he rode beside Ralph; "and I couldn't persuade her to ride to-day, though I'm sure it would have done her good. Oh, no; it's nothing of any moment," he said, in answer to Ralph's enquiry. "That's a good horse you've got there, Ratton!"

"Yes, and not dear, I think," remarked Ralph. "I gave five hundred for him."

Lord Hatherley whistled softly, then he laughed.

"It's a long price; but money's of no object to you, my dear fellow."

"*Oh, I don't know!*" responded Ralph, modestly.

"Speaking of money, did you buy those New Golcondas? I see they have risen."

Lord Hatherley nodded.

"Yes, I did; and it's lucky for me that they have gone up, for I bought rather heavily, more heavily than I should like Bulpit to know. He is rather set against mining shares."

"Oh, Bulpit is too cautious!" said Ralph, with a laugh. "He's as nervous as an old woman. I've bought heavily, too, and I shall secure some more, I think. The financial papers say they are going to double their value."

Lord Hatherley looked at him eagerly.

"Really? You think so?" he said.

The hounds found at that moment and the two men had to ride forward, so that no more was said; but as he rode—straight as usual—Lord Hatherley pondered Ralph's words. In buying of stock as well as betting on horses, even the man who is sensible enough as regards other matters, is always tempted to place reliance on a "tip," however ill qualified to give an opinion the tipster may be.

And that night he wrote to his broker in London instructing him to buy more New Golcondas.

Mary, yielding to her father's persuasion, was present at the following meet. Ralph saw her as she rode up to the cover, and his heart beat and his face flushed; but he did not hasten to join the men who made a circle round her; an admiring circle, for Mary was one of those girls who look their best in riding-habit and ball-dress, and she sat her thoroughbred as a woman does who has ridden since she was a mite of a child.

She was looking rather pale, and a little graver and sadder than usual, but her colour rose for an instant, as Ralph presently rode up to her.

He was careful to keep every sign of *empressement* from his manner and voice as he took off his hat and greeted her; and no one seeing and hearing them would have guessed that he had proposed and been rejected.

"I hope you're better, Lady Mary," he said, "and that we shall have a good run now that you are well enough to come out."

And Mary having thanked him and said something appropriate about the weather, he left her side at once.

But his heart was still beating fiercely, and he watched her from the corners of his eyes, drinking in the beauty and unconscious grace of her presence. When the hounds found, he was inspired by a desire to attract her attention and distin-

guish himself, and with a spurious kind of courage he let his horse have its head, and rode as straight as the straightest of them. The horse, amazed and delighted at its owner's unexpected display of pluck, took advantage of it and went at hedge and rail eagerly, clearing everything like a bird and carrying Ralph in at the death. He had simply stuck on and let the horse go its own way—it was the best thing he could have done—and he received the congratulations of his friends with a modest smile.

"You ride well, Ratton, very well!" said Lord Hatherley, as he came up with Mary by his side; "that last ditch was a stiff one, and most of us funked it—eh, Mary?"

"Oh! all the credit's due to my horse," said Ralph, with a laugh; but Lord Hatherley shook his head.

"No, no! I saw you clear the last two fences, and—well, I couldn't have done it better myself—ten years ago."

Still Mary said nothing, but in silence turned her horse's head homewards. Ralph longed to turn also and ride beside her, but he was too wary. He would give her time. So he kept with the men, who were trying for another fox, and let her go home alone with her father.

They found again; but the fox, after affording them a good run, gave them the slip and ran to earth. They were a long way from home; some of the men made for a way-side inn to rest their horses and get a drink, and Ralph went with them. He was excited by the praise bestowed upon his lucky ride, and, as was usual with him when he was a little "above himself," he drank freely. It is surprising how much liquor a man can take after a couple of runs; but Ralph was soon affected by whiskey—and this was by no means of the best—and as he rode homewards he was flushed of face and more talkative than ordinary.

"Ratton seems to have enjoyed himself," said Lord Parodel, with a laugh, as Ralph waved his hand to them at parting. "Didn't think he could ride as he has done to-day."

"He's mighty pleased with himself," assented the man he addressed. "Never knew him talk so much."

"Or drink," remarked Lord Parodel, musingly. He was one of those who didn't "take to" Ralph. "Ratton is rather a puzzle to me; always doing the unexpected, you know."

"Oh, well, he acquitted himself very well to-day, anyhow," rejoined the other.

Of this fact Ralph was fully sensible as he rode home. He *had shown* Lady Mary that he could not only stop a runaway

horse, but ride straight to hounds; she had heard the praises bestowed upon him, and must have been favourably impressed.

He hummed a tune as he rode up the avenue, his face still flushed, his seat by no means close on his saddle. Then suddenly the tune ceased, and his smile of self-satisfaction gave place to one of amazement and injured dignity; for he saw a man lying at the foot of one of the elms near the railings, his hands in his pockets, a short pipe in his mouth.

Ralph pulled up and eyed the man angrily, then he said in the curt, overbearing way in which a man of his kind always addresses an inferior with whom he is not pleased:

"Here you, sir; do you know you're trespassing?"

The man looked up, and without taking his pipe from his mouth, said, coolly:

"How do you do, Lord Ratton?"

Ralph stared as if he could not believe his ears. That an ordinary-looking man should dare, not only to trespass upon the park, but to address him, the earl, without rising or taking his pipe from his mouth, seemed incredible.

"What the devil are you doing there, and who are you?" he demanded, haughtily.

The man rose slowly, and leisurely approached the railings.

"You don't remember me, Lord Ratton?" he said, as quietly as before, but with a curious smile about his thin lips and in his keen, bird-like eyes.

Ralph did not remember him in the least; a great deal had happened to the Earl of Ratton since they had met, and the calm, curt manner of the man roused him to fury.

"No, I don't, my man," he said, brusquely; "but whoever you are, you are trespassing. This is not a—a—tea-garden, and I don't allow men to lie about smoking. Be off with you, or I'll summons you!"

The small, neatly made man smiled as he stopped his pipe with his little finger.

"You've got a bad memory, my lord," he said, slowly, but with a pleasant ease which was anything but pleasant to Ralph. "Now, I've a remarkably good one. Once I see a face I never forget it. I had the honour of being introduced to you at the bar of the Columbine, Drury Lane. My name's Workley."

Ralph started, and the colour left his face, and he stared in silence at the man for a moment or two. At the man's words, with the remembrance of his face, back came the squalid, miserable Past. He saw the dingy bar, the dyed and

oily fellow-actor, the smirking barmaid; saw the wretched room over Waterloo Bridge, the worn and patient wife he had deserted. The sight of this close-shaven man, with the keen eyes and sinister, smiling lips, recalled it all, and he quailed before the vision.

Then he tried to conceal his discomfiture, and with an effort said, haughtily:

"Yes; I remember you. But I don't acknowledge that the fact of—of your being introduced to me gives you the right to trespass, Mr. Workley."

Mr. Workley nodded.

"That's right enough, my lord," he said. "It wouldn't, as you very properly say; but I happen to have known your father; we met out in Australia. We weren't exactly pals, but—well, I knew him."

He kept his keen eyes on Ralph as he spoke, and he had the satisfaction of seeing Ralph's face grow paler and his frown darker. Ralph looked fixedly at his horse's ears, and faced the situation as quietly as he could.

It would be decidedly unpleasant to have this man telling the story of their meeting. What a piquant little recital could be made of it; the Earl of Ratton lounging over a glass of gin in the dingy bar of a London pub! Had Workley already amused the smoking-room of the Bull with an account of the meeting.

As if he had read the question in Ralph's mind, Mr. Workley, still with the pipe in his mouth, said:

"I'm afraid you're not too well pleased to be reminded of our introduction, my lord. Of course, I can understand that it can't be very agreeable for a young nobleman to meet with a man who knew him when he was down on his luck, before he came into his property; naturally you like to keep the old times dark. Quite so. And I assure your lordship that I haven't informed anyone of our meeting in the Columbine—"

Ralph turned with a look of relief on his face.

—"Or that I had the honour of knowing your lordship's father when he was down on *his* luck," added Mr. Workley, quietly, and with a keen and curious glance at Ralph.

Ralph nodded.

"That—that was very considerate of you, Mr. Workley," he said, with the twist of the under-lip which Mr. Workley had noticed at their first meeting. "Of course a man in my *position does* not like to have the—er—past—"

The little man nodded as if he understood, and it was not necessary for his lordship to continue.

"Having known your father, and made your acquaintance, my lord, I thought I'd like to have a look at the place you've come into, and I just strolled in and had a quiet pipe. No offense, I hope, my lord?"

"Oh, no, not at all," replied Ralph, still with the uncertain frown and the twist of the lip. "Are you staying here —near here?"

"Yes. I've got a relative in the town," replied Mr. Workley, "and I run down now and again to see him. Oh! you can depend on me, my lord," he said, parenthetically, as Ralph's frown grew darker; "I haven't mentioned it to him."

Ralph nodded.

"I'm sure you will understand—be discreet, Mr.—er—Mr. Workley," he said, trying to speak with easy dignity. "And I'm very much obliged to you. If I can be of any—er—service to you now—"

Mr. Workley took his pipe from his mouth, and seemed to be regarding it reflectively; but he was still watching Ralph's face.

"Thank you, my lord," he said. "I shouldn't have mentioned the matter if you had not been so kind as to offer. I am a little short just now, if the truth must be told."

Ralph put his hand in his pocket and drew out some gold. He liked carrying plenty of money about with him; it was a reminder, an evidence of his newly acquired wealth.

"If that is of any use to you—" he said.

Mr. Workley took the money without any display of eagerness; and, without any effusiveness, thanked his lordship.

"Are you—er—staying long in these parts?" enquired Ralph, as casually as he could.

Mr. Workley looked before him contemplatively.

"I really can't say, my lord," he replied; "but if I do, your lordship can rely upon me. I'm one of the best men in the world at holding my tongue. Good-evening, my lord."

He did not touch his hat, but raised it, and calmly climbed the fence and walked off. But as Ralph, after a moment or two, rode on, Mr. Workley stopped and looked after him.

"Does he know?" he muttered. "One minute I thought he did, and the next I was sure he didn't. And yet he gave me the coin readily enough. Now, does he know, or doesn't he? Anyway, I've got a soft thing, a remarkably soft thing!"

CHAPTER XXII.

STELLA'S cry, "I must go back to the island; indeed, indeed I must!" went straight to Lady Cecilia's heart—a very tender and compassionate one. She put one arm round Stella, and soothed her.

"You shall, you shall, dear!" she assured her. "My brother will take you back at once; we will take you anywhere, if you will promise not to fret and make yourself ill again. But you must tell us where the island is. You know we found you in the open sea. There, I don't want to recall it," for Stella had shuddered. "Suppose you try and sleep for a little while, then when you wake, my brother will talk to you; but, indeed, I don't think you ought to talk to anyone, or think of anything just yet."

Stella, murmuring, "How good you are to me, how good!" lay back and closed her eyes.

But she did not sleep, and she did think. And she reflected that she would find Lady Cecilia's question hard to answer. Where was the island? That it was part of Vancouver, of course Stella knew; but Vancouver is somewhat large, and that portion of it on which she and Rath had lived so happily—oh, how happily!—would be hard to find with only her description of it as a guide. Then, again, would Rath be pleased with her if, some day, she sailed into the bay with these kind people?

"The island" belonged to him; he would not be likely to welcome strangers, intruders. Besides, there was the gold! These people might discover the presence of the treasure. She had read of the strange way in which gold revealed itself. And that gold belonged to Rath, and Rath only. What right had she to lead strangers to his island, to endanger his possession of the gold?

Then, on the other hand, perhaps he was mourning for her as one dead, and she ought to go back to him as soon as possible. But she comforted herself with the reflection that Rath did not love her as she now knew that she loved him.

Why should he? He would miss her—surely he would miss her, and mourn for her for a few days; but after then he would grow used to her absence, and be resigned. That she loved him with a love that throbbed through every vein and filled her heart to overflowing, was no reason that he should

love her. No; the island and the gold within it was his secret, and she had no right to betray it.

So, when Lady Cecilia came into the state-room some hours later, she found Stella calmer, and less set upon going back to her "island."

"Are you rested, are you better, dear?" asked Lady Cecilia. "I have been talking to my brother Cecil, and he is quite willing to go back to the island—if you can tell us where it is."

But Stella said, truthfully, that she could not.

"I will go to England with you, if you will take me," she said, with a sigh.

Lady Cecilia smiled.

"Why, of course, my dear child," she responded. "You don't think we are going to throw you overboard? Cecil will do anything, everything you wish; and, of course, so will I. I say 'of course,' because he and I always think and act alike. We are twins. That is why we were christened Cecil and Cecilia. He has only just come into his title and the family estates; and he ought to be at home looking after his land and his people; but I'm supposed to be delicate—indeed, I am afraid I am!—and I was ordered a sea voyage; and Cecil left everything to take me on a voyage in the 'Kingfisher.' It is such a beautiful yacht, as you will see when you are able to come on deck, and that will be very soon, for you are ever so much better."

Lady Cecilia proved a true prophet, for, two days later, Stella came on deck leaning on Lady Cecilia's arm. One of those admirable inventions, a deck-chair, had been arranged for her in the sunlight by Lord Cecil; and he himself wrapped her round with rugs and set a foot-stool for her. Then he withdrew to a little distance with his sister, so that Stella should be alone on this, her reintroduction to the world of life and motion; and Stella could let the tears roll down her cheeks unchecked.

She looked like some tropical flower struck down by a storm as she lay back in her chair, and presently Lord Lisle's eyes wandered to her wistfully.

"How beautiful she is, Cis!" he said. "I wish to Heaven she wouldn't cry! She is crying, I know she is! Has she told you anything of her history—how she came to be in that boat on the open sea?"

His sister shook her head.

"No; she has told me nothing, and she has not asked again to be taken back to the island. She is very quiet, and

when she is not asleep she seems lost in thought, absorbed as if in a dream. I'm afraid I'm terribly curious, Cecil."

He laughed, but in a preoccupied manner.

"The boat in which we found her had the name 'Andromeda' cut in her stern," he said. "Now, the 'Andromeda' was lost some months ago. I forget the date, but I remember reading of it. It must have gone down somewhere off Vancouver. Ask her. No, don't ask her anything. Poor girl! my heart bleeds for her! I'd put the 'Kingfisher' back in a moment if I knew where to put her back for!"

In his way, in his man's way, Lord Lisle was as tender-hearted as his sister—were they not twins?—and his interest in the castaway whom they had rescued grew daily.

For some days, Stella lay back in her deck-chair with closed eyes and, seemingly, unconscious of all that was going on around her. The swish of the water as the magnificent yacht cut through the waves, the rattle of the lines, the subdued sound of the men singing, to the accompaniment of a concertina, in the forecastle, came to her as if in a dream.

All her thoughts were of Rath; Rath alone and solitary on his island; Rath thinking her lost and dead; Rath for whom her heart ached with a longing too keen and painful for words. Oh! if she were back with him, if she could see him, hear his voice, feel his strong arms round her! If she were by any chance restored to him how she would cling to him! There should be no false shame, no reticence. She would not shrink from the touch of his hand as she had done when she had been teaching him to write. No. She would wind her arms round his neck and whisper: "I love you, Rath—I love you!"

After a day or two had passed, Lord Lisle ventured to approach her, and, leaning over her chair, talked in the low, subdued voice appropriate to the invalid, of the yacht and the knots she was making, the weather, and so on. And Stella would look up at him with her lovely eyes and pensive smile, as if her mind, and her heart, were miles away, and answer in monosyllables just a few words. But they were very precious ones to Lord Lisle.

He looked forward to their little, broken converse; he watched her face recovering—not its colour—for it was pale still—but something of the hue of health and strength; he found himself listening and hoping for a lessening of the sadness in the sweet voice. And it was inexpressibly sweet to him.

And Stella always greeted his approach with a smile—a lit-

tle wan and melancholy, but still a smile. He was so boyish, so ingenuous, so like a young sailor without a care or anxiety, that his very presence was like sunshine. She listened to his voice—he went about the snow-white decks singing—with a kind of pleasure. Her heart was full of gratitude to these twins, these kind friends who had rescued her from a terrible death; but she thought of Rath every hour of the day.

One evening, as the "Kingfisher" was sailing before the wind, Lisle leant over her chair—he would lean over her chair by the hours together—and said:

"We ought to make the English coast the day after tomorrow. Do you feel anything of the patriotic thrill, Miss Mordaunt?"

Stella shook her head. Her heart was behind her, on Rath's island.

"No," she said. "I'm sorry, but—"

"Oh, that's all right," he said. "That's only natural. You—you haven't any friends waiting for you. I beg your pardon, Miss Mordaunt!"

She looked up at him with her sad, dreamy eyes.

"It is quite true," she said. "I have no one, nowhere to go. I only want to go"—"back to the island," she might have ended.

"Oh, as to no place to go," he said, "of course you'll go to Lisle Abbey with Cecilia and me—with Cecilia," he said.

She looked at him gravely.

"Oh, no. I could not! Here, on the 'Kingfisher,' it—it is different—you cannot help having me, cannot get rid of me; but when we land—"

He kept his countenance wonderfully well, considering.

"I hope you will consider that it is the same when we reach land," he said. "Seriously, Cecilia would be heartbroken if you deserted her. You will have to come to the Abbey. That is, if—you haven't anywhere else to go."

Stella shook her head, and her eyes filled with tears.

"No, I have nowhere to go; no one I know."

"That's all right, then," he said, cheerfully, and with a thrill of delight. "You'll like the Abbey—or I hope you will. It's an old place, but it's pretty and picturesque, and —let me put that wrap round you; the evenings are growing cool."

He drew the wrap round her, and as she sank back and closed her eyes, he went down to his cabin. Lady Cecilia was there writing letters, and she looked up at him and was struck by something in his face, his eyes.

"Cis, she's coming to the Abbey," he said in a low voice.

She balanced the pen on her taper fingers.

"She is coming to the Abbey?" she said. "You have asked her?"

"Yes," he said, fidgeting about the cabin.

"I'm very glad," said Lady Cecilia. "Are you, Cecil?"

"Glad!" he echoed, with a flash of his bright eyes. "What do you think? Glad! Why, Cis, I love her!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

STELLA had no sooner consented to go home with the Lisles than she, of course, regretted it. Lisle Abbey was not the way back to Rath and the island; and it was to the island she wanted to go with all the longing of her heart, now awakened to a sense of her overwhelming love.

But what could she do? Being absolutely penniless, she could not pay her fare out to Vancouver; and even if she were able to reach it, she could not make her way alone across the land to Rath. Besides, she felt too grateful to the brother and sister who had rescued her to pain them by a refusal. And, indeed, where else could she go? As she had said so pathetically to Lord Lisle, she knew no one, there was no place in which she could find asylum.

As the yacht sailed swiftly towards port, she reflected on her strange and singular position. She knew absolutely nothing of her belongings. She and her mother had always lived together; and her mother had told her nothing of her history, or even mentioned a relative. That seemed natural enough and in no way extraordinary until now; but during these latter days Stella pondered over her curious ignorance, and asked herself what was to become of her. Of course she could not remain a burden on the hands of these kind friends for long, and she formed some vague idea of earning her own living, though how she was to accomplish that seemingly commonplace achievement she did not know. It is a problem which presents many difficulties even to those who are better equipped for its solution than poor Stella was.

As they neared port and she more fully realised her position, her distress increased, and Lady Cecilia, coming upon her suddenly, found her sitting with her face buried in her hands.

"What is it, dear?" she murmured, seating herself beside Stella and gently drawing her hands down. "You mustn't fret like this, for our sakes, for it makes me—to say nothing

of Cecil—so unhappy. Is there anything we can do to help you, to console you?"

"Help me!" echoed Stella, almost desperately, "as if you were not helping me enough. I am homeless and penniless, and you are taking me to your home, and— The very clothes I wear are yours, and—and—I haven't any money to buy others."

Cecilia listened, almost shocked.

"My dear Stella, one does not expect to pick up shipwrecked people with a complete wardrobe in tow, and, of course, you have had to wear mine. Why should you mind? Just reverse our cases, and suppose that it was you who had found me in an open boat; would you object to lending me a few frocks and so on, and do you think I should mind accepting them?"

"Ah! that is very different," said Stella; "you—you are rich, and have friends and relations and some place to go to, while I— Why, you do not even know who I am!"

"Yes; you are Stella Mordaunt, a very sweet and charming girl of whom I have grown very fond," said Lady Cecilia. "And you are alone and helpless, and that is as much as I want to know, dear. Some day, perhaps, you will tell me more about yourself—"

"But I don't know anything!" interrupted poor Stella; and then she confessed her ignorance of her history.

Lady Cecilia concealed her surprise, and soothed her newly found friend.

"It is very romantic, dear," she said in her sweet, low-pitched voice; "but I am sure your loneliness is no fault of yours, and it only increases my interest in you. Now, see, Stella, you have consented to come to the Abbey, and you must make us both happier—my brother and me—by permitting us to be of some real use to you. To speak plainly, you must let us lend you some money."

Stella winced.

"But—but I shall never be able to pay you back," she faltered.

Lady Cecilia laughed.

"How tragically you said that! My dear Stella, you can't tell. Perhaps you will find your relations; perhaps they may turn up and claim you, and tear you away from us—but you won't desert us, Stella?—sooner than you expect. The world is a small place, after all, and it is wonderful how one runs across people. But even if you must repay us— Why,

Stella, an idea has occurred to me! Why shouldn't you be a companion to me?"

She laughed and blushed as she made the suggestion prompted by her desire to save the lonely girl's pride.

"A companion?" said Stella, vaguely.

Lady Cecilia nodded brightly.

"Yes. It is not an uncommon thing for a solitary girl like myself to have a companion; and I am very solitary, dear. I have no one but Cecil, who is, so to speak, a part of myself, and therefore does not count; and if you will accept the position, I should be delighted, and everything will be easy."

"What shall I have to do?" asked Stella, gravely. "I am afraid— There are so few things I can do"—a faint smile crossed her sad face—"except milk cows and catch trout and snare wild duck."

Lady Cecilia stared at her laughingly.

"Why, what an accomplished person you must be! My dear girl, I am ashamed of offering you such a poor place. A lady with such a variety of accomplishments ought to look for something ever so much higher."

Stella tried to laugh, but her lips quivered.

"I learnt to do these things on—on the island," she said; and Lady Cecilia, seeing her eyes filling with tears, hastened to change the subject.

"You can be just what you have been since we picked—since I knew you, dear—just the sweetest and nicest companion to a lonely girl. We can go out calling and do needlework and read together; and of course you will have a salary, and you shall pay me back out of it any money you want now. Is it agreed, dear?" she wound up gently.

Stella nodded. She was too moved to speak.

"I know you are only proposing this to help me," she said. "But perhaps I can be of some little use to you, and —and so repay you."

Then she grew thoughtful for a moment, for she remembered that if she could get back to the island there was gold enough there, not to repay Lady Cecilia for her infinite kindness and affection—no gold could repay that—but for her more material assistance. It struck Stella even at that moment as strangely curious that she should be sitting there penniless and a recipient of charity, while she and Rath were, as a matter of fact, immensely rich! The reflection comforted and cheered her, because it restored her self-respect, and

she smiled pensively as Lord Lisle came up, singing as usual, and his sister explained the arrangement.

"It was a happy idea, Cecil," she said, when they were alone shortly afterwards. "She was fretting over her position, and would have made herself ill again. And when one thinks of it, it is a trying situation for her—to be absolutely penniless and friendless."

"Not friendless, Cis," he put in quickly. "She has us; she will always have you."

"Yes, Cecil," she assented, gravely. She was silent for a moment or two. When he had made the startling announcement that he loved Stella, he had left the cabin abruptly, and neither he nor Cecilia had referred to his avowal since; but now, after the pause, she said in a low voice:

"Cecil, that was a very serious thing you said the other evening."

He coloured, but met her grave, anxious gaze steadily.

"I know it is. But though I am sorry I spoke out so plainly, I've no intention of taking it back. I *do* love her, Cis."

"It is so soon!" she murmured. "And yet I am not surprised. She is so beautiful—I don't think I have ever seen a lovelier face, or one with a greater charm—and she is altogether so fascinating."

He nodded eagerly.

"Yes; that is it. She is unlike any other girl I have met. She is a woman, and yet she is like a child, so simple, so natural, so fearless. Oh! I can't explain!"

"I think I know, dear," she said, her eyes following him lovingly, as he paced up and down the narrow saloon. "Have I not also felt the peculiar charm she exercises? Think of it! She has been with us only this short time, and yet I have grown so fond of her that the mere thought of parting with her is painful to me. I thought at first that I was drawn to like her because we had rescued her and befriended her; but that is not the only reason; it is something in herself. But then we know nothing about her! Cecil, isn't that also a reason why you should—should be careful? Remember, dear, that though we like her so much, are so drawn towards her, that we know absolutely nothing about her. Why, she knows nothing of her own history!"

She told him so much of Stella's story as Stella had told her.

"*It is strange!*" he said; then he sighed. "I've stated to myself all the objections you could put before me, Cis; but it

is of no use! Love and prudence have nothing to say to each other; and—I love her! It came upon me suddenly, as I saw her lying in your arms on the deck; and it has grown and grown each day until it has taken complete possession of me. I am glad she is coming to the Abbey. I am glad you have hit upon this 'companion' idea as an excuse for helping her; for, to speak plainly, Cis, if she had gone, I should have had to follow her! Yes; it is madness, if you like, but it is a madness from which I shall not recover; it will last me my life. We know nothing about her—"

"Except that she is good and pure," said his sister, softly. "I am sure, quite sure of that!"

He laughed, as if the assertion were superfluous.

"Good and pure! Yes, she is an angel," he said. "And I have got to woo and win her, or my life's happiness has gone."

"You—you must not let her see—must not frighten her," said Lady Cecilia.

He nodded and sighed.

"I know! I have got to be very careful. I must keep a guard upon my lips, my very glances. She is like a delicate flower that shrinks from a rough breath of wind. Do you think I don't know that?" He laughed half sadly and pushed his hair from his forehead. "Oh, I'll be careful; trust me."

He went up the deck where Stella was sitting, thinking over the arrangement which Lady Cecilia and she had made, and wondering whether indeed she could be of any use to her; whether she could earn enough to take her back to Rath; and she started from her reverie as Lisle, humming a tune as usual, came up to her chair.

He had been the most light-hearted of men until this waif of the ocean had floated "cross his ken," and he was resolved not to play the forlorn lover. He was wise enough to see that Stella was sad enough as it was, and needed a cheerful and amusing companion. So, though his heart throbbed with the love which had sprung so suddenly into being, he smiled and nodded in his almost boyish fashion, and said:

"The nearer one gets to England, home, and beauty, the more time seems to lag, doesn't it, Miss Mordaunt?"

Stella, though she felt that she was going farther and farther from her home—her heart's home—assented.

"What do you say to a game of quoits?" he asked, brightly.

Stella said that she had never played the game; but he made light of the objection.

"Oh, that's of no consequence! The beginner often does better than the veteran; and you'll soon learn."

One of the crew, looking as smart as a man-o'-war's man, brought the quoits and set up the pins, and Lisle showed her how to hold the ring of rope and canvas and pitch it on to the "jack." It seemed easy enough as he did it, but she made a score of misses before she succeeded in throwing the quoit on to the pin, and insensibly she began to get interested in the game.

Lisle played in the most matter-of-fact way, and, strangely enough, though he was a very good hand at the game, made a great many misses. His sister, as she lay back in a chair and looked on, could scarcely repress a smile as she saw the almost audacious way in which he just permitted himself to win the game.

"That was a near thing," he said, cheerfully. "I only got it by one point. Shall we have another, or are you tired?"

For a moment his anxiety showed through his caution, and his eyes dwelt upon her earnestly; but Stella said that she was not tired, and they played again.

During her stay in the island, Stella had acquired a supple wrist and a dexterity at most things requiring a quick eye and manual skill, and she soon picked up the game and began to score. Lisle was delighted with her success, and glanced covertly and proudly at the smiling and amused Cecilia.

"I never knew anyone pick up the game so quickly," he declared. "Most people, women especially, take days before they can get home with one quoit. You must have a good eye, Miss Mordaunt, to say nothing of a steady hand."

But he would not let her play a third game, and insisted upon her going back to her chair, and when he had wrapped her up he lit a cigarette and went off to the other end of the yacht, leaving her and Cecilia alone, though he longed to remain beside her, if not to talk to her, to sit and glance at her occasionally.

He pursued these tactics for the remainder of the voyage. Sometimes they played the games with which people pass the time on ship-board, sometimes he would lean over her chair and tell her stories of his college days, and of his travels; and once or twice he offered her his arm, and got her to walk with him up and down the deck; talking all the time in the casual, unconcerned way into which he had schooled himself, though his heart was beating painfully as he felt the light weight of

her arm, and he had hard work to meet her glance with a calm and matter-of-fact expression in his own.

And day by day Stella grew stronger, and if not happier, less utterly wretched. She was still preoccupied and absent-minded—how could she be otherwise when she was forever thinking of Rath?—and often Lisle knew, by the sad, far-away look in her eyes, that she was not listening to him; but love, though impatient enough, can also be patient; which is a paradox, but true; and Lisle "served and waited," as the old song says, as your true lover will. But with her recovered health, Stella's natural courage revived. Hope whispered that she might win her way back to Rath, and Hope is the grandest medicine and tonic known to the College of Physicians; so that when the "Kingfisher" glided to the crowded quay, she leant on the taffrail and looked about her with something like colour in her clear cheeks and a light in her eyes.

"Welcome to England!" said Lisle, coming up to her, "and in a few hours I shall be able to say, 'Welcome to the Abbey!' We are going straight on there, as you know. No, don't worry about anything"—for Stella had turned with, "I must see if I can help Lady Cecilia"—"everything is done and ready; and you must not forget that you are not yet quite off the sick-list."

Stella laughed softly.

"I am quite well, Lord Lisle," she said, emphatically; "and you must not treat me any longer as an invalid!" and she left him and went down to the saloon. He looked after her with a sigh, then forced a resolute smile as he told himself that a time should come when he would be able to say, "Stay here by my side, dearest!" and she would stay.

So that they should not have the tedium of a wait at the noisy port, he had ordered a special train; and towards evening they reached the station, where the Abbey carriage was awaiting them. On their way to the house, Lisle leant from his seat and pointed out to Stella the various objects of interest.

"It is a lovely county," she said in a low voice, but with an absent look in her eyes; for she was thinking of the fairy-like beauty of the island. Lisle was as delighted with her approval as if he were trying to sell her the whole county.

"I think you will like it when you have seen something of it," he said. "Here is the Abbey."

Stella looked in the direction indicated and saw an old mansion covered with ivy, which emphasised rather than obscured

the beauty of the building, and she uttered an exclamation of admiration.

"How beautiful!" she said. "How—proud you must be of it!"

"He is," said Cecilia, laughing, "though he is always grumbling because the rooms aren't lofty, and are sometimes damp."

"Oh, they're not damp now," he said, falling into the trap. "Don't permit yourself to be alarmed, Miss Mordaunt."

Lady Cecilia laughed.

"I thought that would nettle him," she said. "Yes, dear, we are both proud of the Abbey. You see, Cecil has not possessed it very long, though the Lisles have been there for five centuries. I think we bought it—or stole it, was it, Cecil?—about 1400."

As the carriage drove up to the entrance, Lisle handed them out, and, passing through a lane of servants who looked and spoke their welcome to their young lord, they went into the hall. A fire was burning in a fire-place almost as large as a room, and its glow gave a cheerful aspect to the walls of panelled oak, the big family pictures, and the effigies in armour which stood grimly beneath them.

"And now I can say, 'Welcome to the Abbey!'" said Lisle.

"And a cup of tea!" added Cecilia, lightly and quickly, lest Stella should notice the scarcely veiled passion in her brother's eyes; and she went to the table where the stately butler stood beside the costly tea equipage.

A great deerhound which had welcomed his master and mistress with affectionate but dignified delight, came up to Stella and thrust his nose in her hand, and, bending over him, she was enabled to conceal the tears caused by the kindness of her friends and rescuers.

"Of course I'm dying to show you over the place," said Lisle; "but I'm not going to yield to the temptation. You must both rest until dinner-time; I insist upon it! To-morrow morning we will make a round of inspection."

"During which you will have to praise everything you see, whether you admire it or not, Stella," said Lady Cecilia. "Cecil is firmly convinced that there is no place in England—in the county, at any rate—to compare with the Abbey for beauty and antiquity!"

Lisle laughed as he lit a cigarette.

"Don't you believe that I'm such an idiot, Miss Mordaunt!

If you admire the Abbey, you wait until you see some of the other places—Ratton Hall, for instance."

"Well, we will wait!" said Cecilia. "Come along, Stella!"

She linked her arm in that of her "companion," and led Stella to the room set apart for her. It was one of the best in the old house, and Stella, as she looked round it, could only murmur her appreciation and admiration.

"It is beautiful!" she said in a low voice; then, shyly and hurriedly, she added: "You are treating me as a guest, Lady Cecilia!"

"Well, and aren't you?" retorted Cecilia, opening her blue eyes. "Oh! I forgot; you are my 'companion!' Oh, yes, that is all right; but, you see, I want my companion to be happy, and so I give her a pleasant room—it is pleasant, isn't it, dear? Isn't that a lovely view?" She led Stella to the window. "My dear child," there are thirty or more bedrooms in the old place; why shouldn't you have one of the best? Now, you must lie down—Cecil is a tyrant in his way, and will be angry if we disobey him—and when you hear the dressing-bell ring a maid shall come to you."

But Stella drew the line at this.

"No, no!" she said, with a laugh. "Please do not send her! I have never had a maid, and I should not know what to do with her."

"Oh, Susy will know what to do," said Lady Cecilia, easily. "Don't bother, there's a dear girl."

When she was left alone, Stella sat down and looked round her like one in a dream.

It seemed only the other day that she was running about the island like—like a boy, and here she was in an English mansion, surrounded by luxury, the guest of an English nobleman and his sister! It was so strange, so sudden a change that she felt confused; but Stella was not lacking in common sense and will-power, and she resolved that the arrangement she had made with Lady Cecilia should be carried out.

She was a companion, a dependent, and she could at least endeavour to earn the money with which she would make her way back to Rath.

Meanwhile, Cecilia was lecturing her brother in his own room.

"You really must be careful, Cecil," she said, half laughingly. "The way in which you said 'Welcome to the Abbey,' the expression of your face, were too plain."

"*I know,*" he said, penitently. "I know I gave myself

away. I could not help it. To see her here, under my roof, see her with the innocent wonder in her lovely eyes as she looked round— But she did not notice?"

Lady Cecilia shook her head thoughtfully.

"No, she did not notice your tone and manner, Cecil. She is quite innocent and blind, at present. I wonder what it is that so completely occupies her mind, that keeps her so ignorant of your infatuation for her?"

"Don't call it infatuation," he said. "It is an ignoble word for such a love as mine. But I will be careful, Cis."

"You must, if—if you hope to win her," she said. "I have a feeling, a presentiment, that if she knew you loved her, she would—"

"What?"

"Take flight," said his sister, gravely; "so be cautious for my sake, for I have grown very fond of her, and I don't want to lose her."

"To lose her!" he echoed, with dismay.

CHAPTER XXIV.

AMONGST the dresses which Lady Cecilia had lent to Stella was an evening one. It was a simple affair of black silk and lace, and the maid, who, notwithstanding Stella's protest, appeared when the dressing-bell rang, selected it for Stella's wear, and helped her on with it.

Stella and Lady Cecilia were of the same height, and the dress fitted remarkably well; and Lord Lisle, as he waited for her at the bottom of the stairs, had hard work to keep his admiration from revealing itself in his eyes.

"You are not looking a bit tired," he said, as if by not doing so she had deserved well of the State. "This is the drawing-room. Wants doing up—redecorating—doesn't it?"

But Stella stood enraptured by the beauty of the room with its panelled ceiling, and ivory and gold walls, its ormolu furniture, and costly pictures.

"Why, it's perfect!" she said.

"Then I hope you will like the dining-room," he said, with half-concealed eagerness. "It is in better order than this. It was restored, refurnished, by my uncle, the late owner of the Abbey. He spent some pains and money over the picture-gallery and music-room; he was an enthusiast on music."

"Now, your promise, Cecil!" exclaimed Lady Cecilia, entering at that moment.

He laughed.

"Pardon, Miss Mordaunt! I forgot my promise. Come along. You ought to be hungry, if you are not."

He gave Stella his arm and led her into the dining-room. It was a magnificent apartment, panelled with oak, and lightened by modern pictures of famous artists. The butler and a couple of footmen waited at table, and Stella noticed the magnificent array of heavy plate. Only a few weeks ago she had eaten her meals in the open, under a tree, or on the beach, and the strange and sudden contrast might well have confused and embarrassed her; but, to Lady Cecilia's satisfaction and delight, Stella was perfectly self-possessed and free from any appearance of *gaucherie*. She accepted the service of the stately butler and his satellites, the footmen, as if she had been accustomed to them all her life, and Lady Cecilia unconsciously breathed a sigh of relief and satisfaction.

She, like her brother Cecil, had been fascinated by Stella's beauty and the nameless charm which she wielded so unconsciously. But Lady Cecilia was, of course, alive to the objections which might be urged against a marriage between a Lisle of Lisle Abbey and a waif of the ocean. She brushed aside her own aristocratic prejudices and was willing, indeed anxious, that he should win Stella, and admitted she herself was not proof against the charm which Stella so unconsciously wielded.

And this charm, this fascination, was intensified when they went into the drawing-room after dinner, and Lord Lisle, quite by chance, said:

"Do you play, Miss Mordaunt?"

Stella hesitated. She had a sweet voice, a voice which had been made strong by singing to Rath in the open air on the island; but she was reluctant to trying it here, in the magnificent drawing-room of the Abbey; but Lady Cecilia drew Stella's arm within hers and led her to the piano.

"I have not sung for—for so long!" said Stella. "I don't know whether I can or not."

"Let us see, dear," said Lady Cecilia; and she sat down and struck some chords.

"I must play for myself, I am afraid," said Stella. "But it is so long since I saw a piano."

Lady Cecilia rose, and Stella seated herself at the piano. It was, as she had said, so long since she had played, and sung to, an instrument, that she felt strange; but after a moment or two she remembered the notes, and played and sang that melody which no one can sing fairly well without bringing tears into the eyes of the listeners, "Eily Mavourneen."

As she sang it, she thought of the island and of Rath, and the last notes of the song—the sweetest, the saddest, ever written—were tremulous with her emotion.

Lisle stood near the piano, a smile on his face, but an aching pain in his heart. If he should lose her! If he should lose her! He was so agitated by the longing, the desire, that possessed him that he left the room.

Stella slept little that night. The present, the actual, were mixed inextricably with the past, and she dreamt that she was back in the island, singing to Rath as he felled a tree, or made snares for the wild duck, or that he was carrying her in his arms across the beach, and her head was lying on his shoulder.

The next morning the late autumn sun filled her bedroom with light, and as she woke from a dream of the island and of Rath, the maid came in with a cup of tea.

"My lady said I was not to wake you, miss," she said, shyly, for she was a country girl just promoted to the position of lady's-maid; "but I heard you sigh as I opened the door, and I knew you were awake."

Stella raised herself on her elbow and looked at the girl dreamily.

"You must have sharp ears," she said.

The girl blushed, and looked down.

"I sleep in the little room next yours, miss," she said, as if in explanation, "and I—I heard you crying in the night—Oh! I beg your pardon, miss! I didn't mean to be disrespectful!"

Stella motioned to her to come nearer to her, and looked at her. The girl was pretty, but rather pale and sad-looking.

"What is your name?" asked Stella.

"Bligh, miss—Susy Bligh," replied the girl.

"But, Susy, you must have been awake to have heard me crying—if I did cry," said Stella, shrewdly.

The girl's face flushed, then grew pale again.

"I—I didn't sleep very well, miss," she said.

"What is the matter?" asked Stella, pushing the falling hair from her face and regarding the girl with gentle curiosity.

Susy hung her head and bit her lip softly, then she hastily wiped a tear from her eyes.

"He—he enlisted, miss, and—and he's gone abroad with his regiment," she faltered.

Stella took the girl's hand and stroked it, and poor Susy,

overcome by such tender and unexpected sympathy, sank on her knees beside the bed and hid her face in her hands.

"I'm—I'm very sorry, miss, and I beg your pardon, and hope you'll overlook it," she sobbed, apologetically. "I don't know what made me tell you, I don't. It was the kind way you looked and spoke to me. And I hope you won't tell Lady Cecilia that I—that I cried."

"No, I will not tell her," said Stella.

"Thank you, miss. She'd think me ungrateful, miss, and so it is; for I've got a good place, and I'm—I'm in every way comfortable; but I—I can't forget him. It's very wicked of me, miss, and of course you can't understand, being a lady, how a girl feels when her young man goes for a soldier, and is taken from her to some far foreign parts."

Stella smiled; it was a smile very near indeed to tears.

"I—I think I can understand, Susy," she said, so gently that the girl's tears broke out afresh. "But you must not get low-spirited. He will come back presently; he will not forget you."

"Oh, no, no, miss; I'm not afraid of that!" sobbed the pretty, pale-faced girl. "But—but something may happen to him."

"Nothing will happen to him," said Stella, cheerfully. "He will come back safe and sound, and—and you will be married and happy ever afterwards, Susy."

The girl's smile broke through her tears, and she edged nearer to Stella and looked at her gratefully and shyly.

"Thank you, miss," she faltered. "You are very kind to overlook my—my foolishness, and—and, oh, do you think you'd like me for your maid? If you would, I should be so glad; and, indeed, I'd do my best, miss."

"If I have a maid, you shall be the one, Susy," said Stella. "But, Susy, you—you must not tell anyone you heard me crying in the night."

The girl looked shocked by the injunction.

"Oh, no, no, miss! Why, miss, how do I know that you haven't some trouble like mine—begging your pardon, miss, for presuming."

"There is no need to beg my pardon, Susy," said Stella. "We all have our troubles, and—and I have mine."

Stella mentioned the girl to Lady Cecilia at breakfast that morning.

"May you have her? Certainly, my dear Stella," said Lady Cecilia at once. "She is a very nice girl, I believe. She was in the laundry, but Mrs. Hopkins has taken her in

hand lately, and trained her for a visitors' maid. Why, have you taken a fancy to her? She is rather a pretty girl, isn't she?"

"Yes," said Stella; but she did not add that her reason for taking to the girl was because Susy was separated from her sweetheart.

After breakfast, Lisle took the two girls over the Abbey and the grounds. He played the part of cicerone with a modest pride, and was delighted with Stella's appreciation and admiration, which she could not find words to express.

"It isn't a bad old place," he said, with the modest kind of apology proper to the owner. "And when I've restored the east wing and— Who's this, Cis?" he broke off to ask.

They had turned the corner of the house, and, just as they did so, a lady rode up on horseback, followed by a groom.

Lady Cecilia shaded her eyes from the sun, then exclaimed: "Why, it is Mary Hatherley!"

CHAPTER XXV.

THE Lisles hurried forward to welcome Mary.

"Why, Molly, dear, what a delightful surprise! How good of you to come over so soon!" exclaimed Cecilia; and as Mary slipped from her saddle, she put her arm round her and kissed her affectionately; for the two girls were great friends.

"I heard that you had come back, and I rode over directly," said Mary as she shook hands with Lisle. "How well you are both looking! I am dying to hear about your travels! What a long time you have been away!"

"Oh! I've a budget to unfold!" said Cecilia; then she looked round at Stella, who had hung back to allow the two friends to exchange greetings. "Mary, this is a new, but a very dear friend of ours—Miss Mordaunt. Stella, Lady Mary Hatherley is an old school-fellow and neighbour."

Stella came up, and the two regarded each other with the conventional gravity, but each felt somewhat attracted, and Mary held out her hand with the Hatherley smile which so few persons could resist.

They went into the house, and after a minute or two Stella quietly left them and strolled into the garden.

"What a lovely face!" exclaimed Mary, as soon as Stella was out of hearing.

"Isn't she beautiful?" responded Cecilia, "and she is as sweet as she is beautiful. We—met her in our travels"—she and Cecil had agreed to tell no one of the way in which

they had "met" Stella—"and we have induced her to come to the Abbey. She is supposed to be my companion, but it is a convenient fiction. I am so glad you admire her, and I am sure you will like her when you know her. Life has been a different thing since she came to us, hasn't it, Cecil?"

He assented gravely.

"And now come up to my room and take off your hat! Of course you are going to spend the day with us, and we'll ride part of the way home with you."

The two went up to Lady Cecilia's room, and Cecilia sat by the dressing-table and regarded her old school-fellow and friend lovingly as Mary stood before the glass taking off her hat. The excitement of their meeting had brought the colour to Mary's face, but it had died away by this time, and Cecilia saw that she was pale and that there was a melancholy look in the beautiful eyes which had not been there when they had parted in the early spring.

"And now tell me all the news, Mary," she said. "Have you been quite well, dear?"

"Oh, yes; quite," said Mary, but rather listlessly.

"But have you? You are looking paler, thinner—but prettier than ever, dear."

Mary looked at her reflection in the glass absently.

"Am I not looking well? Yes, I am thinner, I think," she said, casually. "News? I don't think there is much."

"How is Lord Hatherley? I hope he hasn't forgotten the girl he used to call the 'second favourite!'"

Mary smiled, but rather sadly.

"He is not likely to forget you, dear; and he would have come over with me, but he has a touch of the gout. He has not been very well lately. I think he is worried about something."

Lady Cecilia looked surprised.

"It is strange to hear of your father worrying about anything; he is always so bright and cheerful. What is it, Molly?"

Mary hesitated.

"I scarcely know," she said; "business of some kind, I fancy; but he does not tell me—now; perhaps he thinks I should not understand," she added, as if she should not seem to be complaining. "Women do not understand business, you know, Cis. It is something in which he and—Lord Ratton"—she paused a moment before she spoke his name—"are mutually concerned."

"*Lord Ratton*, the new earl!" exclaimed Cecilia. "I

want to hear all about him, Molly. You know he did not appear—turn up—until after we had gone. We read a short paragraph about his claim and succession to the title, and we are, of course, very curious to hear what he is like. Is he nice, Molly? Do you see much of him?"

Mary answered the last question, evading the first.

"Yes; a great deal. He comes over to us—to see father—nearly every day, and—oh, yes! we see him very often."

"What is he like?" asked Cecilia, with natural curiosity. "He is very young, of course? Is he good-looking and—well, nice in every way? Do you like him, Molly?"

"Lord Ratton is young, and—yes, good-looking," said Mary, very quietly. "Most persons would call him handsome."

"Which means that you don't," commented Cecilia.

"It does not matter very much whether I do or do not," responded Mary, with a laugh which sounded strange and forced to Cecilia. "He is very popular—extremely so, and with all sorts and conditions of people, for he is very hospitable—there have been a great many entertainments at the Hall since he came—and he is very good to the tenants and the people on the estates."

"Notwithstanding all which, I see you don't like him very much, Molly," remarked Cecilia, with a woman's shrewdness.

Mary flushed for a moment.

"I ought to be very grateful to him, for he saved my life," she said, gravely.

"Saved your life!" exclaimed Cecilia. "Why, how? Tell me, Molly."

Mary related the incident of the runaway horse and Ralph's plucky rescue; but though she told the story graphically, and exaggerated rather than depreciated her danger and Ralph's courage, Cecilia noticed that there was none of the enthusiasm in Mary's voice which might have been expected.

"I can never forget it, and father—"

"I know how your father must feel towards him, Molly. He must feel that he owes Lord Ratton a debt he can never repay—your life! Oh, Molly! we are all grateful to him! If he is so popular and hospitable and good to the people on the estate, and possesses such courage, he *must* be nice. Why, Mary, he is quite a hero."

"Yes," assented Mary, mechanically. "I daresay you *will like Lord Ratton.*"

"*I will get Cecil to* ride over to call on him to-morrow,

and we will ask him to dinner. You and Lord Hatherley will come, Molly?"

A shade passed over Mary's pale face.

"Father does not go out much now, Cis," she replied, in so constrained a fashion that Cecilia tactfully hastened to change the subject.

"And now tell me about some of our other friends, Molly. How are the Bryans, for instance?"

Mary turned aside to put down a hair-brush, so that Cecilia did not see the crimson which flooded her friend's face.

"They are very well," she replied. "I lunched there yesterday. They are delighted at your home-coming."

"And where is Edward?" asked Cecilia, eagerly. "Have they heard from him lately?"

"He is abroad," said Mary, very quietly, her face pale again, and her manner well under control. "They have not heard very lately—he is in the wilds somewhere and cannot write."

"Dear old Ned!" said Cecilia. "I hope he is getting on all right. What a dear fellow he is! Do you remember the happy times we four—you and he, and Cecil and I—used to have in the holidays? There never was anyone so nice as Edward Bryan! What a pity it is that he is not the eldest son. But I ought not to have said that, Molly, and yet one can't help regretting it. You were always his special favourite, you know, and we used to tease him about you."

"I remember," said Molly in a low voice. "And now tell me about yourselves and all that's happened to you, Cis, on your travels."

Cecilia was silent for a moment. She noticed a change in her once light-hearted school-fellow. Mary, who used to be the most frank-hearted of girls, had become reserved, and seemingly cold; and what was the meaning of the subtle air of melancholy in her voice and manner, and the sad expression in the eyes which Cecilia remembered sparkling with innocent, girlish fun? She spoke and looked as if a cloud were hanging over her, as if she had something on her mind.

If Lady Cecilia Lisle and Lady Mary Hatherley had been a couple of factory hands or domestic servants, Cecilia would have risen and thrown her arm round Mary's neck and asked her what was the matter; but they were two ladies of rank, and in their world impulse is held in check, and confidences are waited for, not invited. Besides, Mary's secret sorrow had lent her a new and strange dignity, which alone was sufficient to curb Cecilia's longing to learn Mary's trouble and comfort

her. So she gave Mary an account of their travels; and she, on her hand, had something to conceal when she spoke of Stella.

"We—we met her quite by accident," she said, "and I have grown very fond of her. Poor girl! she has no relations, and is quite alone in the world. I hope you will like her, Molly. But, indeed, you won't be able to help it!"

Mary had gone to the window and was gazing out with the far-away look in her eyes which was now their habitual expression; but she was listening to Cecilia with interest.

"I am sure I shall like her," she said, warmly, "and it is just like you to—" She stopped suddenly, as if something in the garden below had attracted her attention. Cecilia went to the window to see what it was. Stella and Cecil were standing on the lawn, and as Mary had been speaking, he had stopped and picked a flower and offered it to Stella. There was nothing to attract attention in the simple action; but Mary and Cecilia saw the look in his eyes as he gave Stella the flower; and Mary glanced at Cecilia with a startled look, and turned away from the window as if she had seen something that was not intended for her eyes.

Cecilia crimsoned.

"I know, dear," she said in a low voice. "Yes, he is in love with her. He has been in love with her ever since—from the first moment—we saw her. It was love at first sight. I know what you think, what everybody will say. They will blame me for having her here, for making so close a friend of her. But, Molly, she is good and true, and though she has no position, and though we know so little of her, I cannot interfere, cannot come between them. And if I wished to do so, I could not. My heart's on her side, Molly. Isn't that strange? It must seem so to you; and you will blame me."

Mary turned, with a sudden colour in her face and a light in her eyes.

"No, I don't blame you!" she said, with an earnestness, an emotion which almost startled Cecilia. "Why should you come between them? What right have you, has anyone, to wreck Lord Lisle's happiness? If he loves her—and I can see that he does, I saw his face just now—why should anyone interfere? If she is good and pure, what does it matter if she is not of the same rank as ourselves; if she is poor—I suppose she is poor?"

Cecilia inclined her head in silence; she was surprised by Mary's unusual vehemence.

"He is rich enough for both, rich enough to choose. Oh!

how fortunate he is, how fortunate!" she broke off, with sudden bitterness. "I am sick of the worldliness that separates two persons who love each other because the one is poor or not in 'Society.' Money, rank! We worship them nowadays. As if they were the only things that brought happiness! Happiness! Is there any class so unhappy as ours! Oh, Cis! I never pass the lodge without envying the keeper and his wife; they are just married—they have been in love with each other since they were children; and because they happen to be poor working people they are permitted to be happy. There was a smile on her face to-day, as I stopped and spoke to her—that made me want to kiss her—while we who are supposed to be free and privileged are little better than slaves to Rank and Mammon!"

She stopped for lack of breath; then her eyes filled with tears and her lips quivered; but suddenly she recovered her self-control, and with a laugh that was broken by something like a sigh, said, apologetically:

"I've quite startled you with my socialistic outburst, haven't I, Cis? But don't mind me. I—I have been thinking over things lately, and—and what you said about Lord Lisle and that beautiful girl set me off. Wasn't that the luncheon bell I heard?"

They went down-stairs and found Lisle and Stella awaiting them; and perhaps because her outburst had done her good, Mary was more like her old self.

"When two women, who are bosom friends, get together after a long absence, Miss Mordaunt, you can scarcely expect them to have any consideration for their starving fellow-creatures!" said Lisle. His face was aglow with happiness, his blue eyes sparkling. "Just as you came down, Mary, Miss Mordaunt and I were meditating an attack upon our pieces of bread. Seafaring people are hungry folk. Has Cis been giving you a true and particular account of our wanderings? I've brought you a case of shells, Mary. Do you remember how we used to hunt for them, in the old days, and how Ned Bryan fell off the rock into the pool?"

Cecilia saw Mary wince, and adroitly switched her brother on to another subject; a safe one, as she thought.

"Cecil, you must call on Lord Ratton to-morrow," she said.

"Very good, mum," he said, touching his forehead.

"You see what an obedient brother I am, Miss Mordaunt. What's he like, Mary? You must know that we have quite a romance of the peerage in our county," he went on, address-

ing Stella, and so saving Mary from the necessity of a reply. "The late Earl of Ratton died without kith or kin, as it was thought, but a young nephew sprang up from no one knows where, and claimed the title and estates—and got 'em, which is quite another thing. You remember I mentioned Ratton Hall last night? You'd like to see it, wouldn't you? Suppose we all drive over to-morrow, Cis?"

Cecilia laughed.

"Isn't that like a man! If he can't get out of a morning call, he will contrive to get some one to bear him company."

"And share his misery," put in Lisle. "Quite so. Did you ever hear the story of the man who went to pay a call, and said to the servant who opened the door, 'Is Lady So-and-So in? I'll give you half a crown, my man, if you say she isn't.' But, seriously, I shall be happy to make Lord Ratton's acquaintance. I liked his uncle, the late earl, poor fellow!"

"Why do you pity him—because he is dead?" asked Stella.

She had scarcely spoken as yet, and Mary was struck by the sweetness and tone of the voice.

"No; because he lived," said Lisle, with momentary gravity. "The fact is, there is a tragedy connected with the House of Ratton. The late earl and his elder brother quarrelled, and the brother disappeared suddenly with his little boy—who would be the heir if he had lived."

"My dear Cecil, what a muddle you are making of it; isn't he, Molly? How can you expect Stella to understand?"

Lisle laughed.

"Let me give you a piece of fowl to sustain you while I try and explain, Miss Mordaunt. No? You'd better; you'll need some sustenance. In two words, then, there were three brothers, and this young man—what is his name, Mary?"

"Ralph," she said, looking straight before her, and speaking in a voice absolutely without expression.

"Thanks. This young man inherits because one of the brothers and his little boy disappeared. Were drowned. Oh, yes, we must call and pay our respects. Ratton is the oldest peerage in the county."

"Older than the Lisle's?" put in Mary, with a spark of mischief in her eyes.

"My dear Mary, the Lisles only came over here with that charming but somewhat unscrupulous robber, William of Normandy, while the Rattons—oh, I believe they spring from one of the earliest Saxon earls—no pun intended, Miss Mordaunt. So we'll drive over to-morrow and pay tribute. I

see by the papers that Lord Ratton is a liberal supporter of the hounds and all the local charities; and by the tone of the paragraph I should think he is rather a good fellow, and will be an acquisition to the county. Does your father like him, Mary?"

"Very much indeed—they are great friends," said Mary, very quietly.

"Then he's bound to be all right," said Lisle, cheerfully. "Come and see our trophies, the spoils of foreign climes, Mary. They are all of a heap in the billiard-room at present."

As he led the way, Stella lingered behind, intending to go to her room; but he looked round, and said quickly, though casually:

"You must come, too, Miss Mordaunt. Miss Mordaunt is an authority on sea-birds—quite an ornithologist, I assure you; isn't she, Cis?—and I sha'n't remember their names."

Stella hesitated a moment, then she followed the others. Lord Lisle was in a sense her employer, and it was her duty to obey. They spent some time examining the curios; indeed, tea was brought into the billiard-room; and when Mary declared that she must go, Lisle said, as if he had arranged it all, that Cis should ride part of the way with her, and that he would drive.

"We'll have the dog-cart. It will be a good opportunity of showing Miss Mordaunt a little of the immediate neighbourhood," he added, as if he took it for granted that Stella would accompany them; and when she said she thought she would stay at home, he waved her objection aside in his boyish way.

"Oh, but you must! Who is to keep me company if you don't come? Those two will ride close together and talk to each other all the time, and quite forget me."

"Yes, come, Stella, dear," said Cecilia; and Stella yielded, as a matter of course. Lord Lisle wore his heart so plainly on his sleeve that Mary had discovered his secret within the first half hour of her visit; but Stella was still in complete ignorance of his love for her, and attributed his expressed desire for her society, his close but respectful attention, to the good nature which was so characteristic of these two friends whom Heaven had sent to her aid.

As she and Mary were waiting in the hall for Cecilia, Mary said, with her winning smile, and with the gentle little timidity which made her so irresistible:

"Cecilia has promised to bring you over to see us, Miss Mordaunt. My father will be so glad to see you! The Lisles

and we are old friends, and you must let us claim you for a friend also."

Stella's colour came and went, but she looked at Mary courageously.

"Has Lady Cecilia told you, Lady Mary, that—that though she is good enough to call me her friend, I am in reality her companion, her servant?"

Mary blushed.

"She would not like to hear you say that," she said, quickly but gently.

"No; she is all that is good and kind. Perhaps you don't know, Lady Mary, that I was—homeless and friendless until Lord and Lady Lisle found me; that but for them I should be still homeless and friendless."

Her lovely eyes grew moist, and her voice shook a little, but she went on bravely:

"I want you to know it. It is right that everybody should know it. Oh! it is not because I am proud—oh, no, no! but because no one should be deceived."

Mary was touched by the sweet humility in the lovely eyes and the soft, musical voice, and her own eyes were moist as she impulsively held out her hand.

"I know; oh, yes, I understand!" she said, quickly, for Cecilia was coming down the stairs. "But—but Cecilia would be hurt if you set up any difference between you."

"I know," said Stella, quickly and in a low voice. "But is it not right that I should tell you? Would it be honest for me to take advantage of her kindness—"

"Here we are!" cried Lisle, springing down the stairs as the dog-cart and the horses came to the door.

CHAPTER XXVI.

It was a lovely evening, and Lord Lisle's light-heartedness seemed infectious.

"You two ride in front," he said, as he put Mary and Cecilia into their saddles, "and we will drive behind, like royalty with a couple of outriders in advance."

"Is that the young mare, Cecil?" asked his sister, glancing at the horse in the dog-cart. "It seems rather fidgety and restless."

"Yes. It only wants to take the lead, like the rest of its sex. *It's all right.* You don't suppose I'd run any risks with *Miss Mordaunt* in the cart? You are not nervous, I know, *Miss Mordaunt.*"

Stella laughed. Her eyes were bright and her cheeks flushed with the prospect of the drive.

"No, I don't think I'm nervous," she said. "What a beautiful creature it is!"

"Isn't she? She'd make a splendid lady's hack, and I'm going to try her with a side-saddle to-morrow; then, if she turns out satisfactorily, you shall try her."

"I?" said Stella. "But I can't ride."

"Really!" he exclaimed, with pleasant mockery. "It is quite a relief to hear of something that you can't do. Were there no horses in that mysterious island?"

It was an unfortunate question, for it brought back the past to Stella. Her eyes grew sad, and the brightness fled from her face.

"No," she said in a low voice.

"Then I shall have the delight of teaching you," he said.

He helped her up into the high cart and carefully arranged the wrap round her, holding the young horse well in hand as he did so. It made a little fuss at starting, and attempted to rear; but Lisle was a capital whip, and he coaxed it on to its forefeet, and presently it went off quietly enough. Though the two in front did not ride very fast, he contrived to keep some way behind them, and so had Stella all to himself. The cart was by no means a wide one, and they had to sit close to each other, and every time her arm touched his his heart leapt, and he was obliged to turn his head aside lest she should see the love-light glowing in his eyes. Now and again he readjusted the wrap as it slipped down after the manner of wraps, and if Stella had not been so absorbed, she must have noticed how his hand trembled. But he talked lightly and cheerfully, pointing out the places of interest which they passed on their way, and planning all sorts of excursions.

"We'll have a picnic; it isn't too late for that sort of thing, is it? Look at those ruins, Miss Mordaunt; you'll be rather interested in them," he remarked, as they came to the remains of an old castle. "And there's the river. I'm afraid it's too late for trout; but we'll have some fishing there next spring. I'll have the river restocked, and put a water bailiff on to it, so that you may get some sport. Cis tells me that you are a skilled angler."

"But—but I may not be here next spring, Lord Lisle," she said, roused from her reverie, and somewhat startled by his disposal of the future.

He glanced at her quickly, as if her words had filled him with dismay.

"Oh, I—I hope so!" he said, as lightly as he could. "Why, what plans have you? You must not dream of leaving us. What should we—what would Cis—do without you? You see how lonely we are, how much we treasure your society."

Stella smiled sadly. Lonely with hosts of friends and neighbours! She thought of Rath alone on his island.

"You mustn't be so cruel as to talk of going, unless—unless you are unhappy," he added, gravely.

Stella looked at him with sudden compunction.

"How ungrateful you must think me!" she said in a low voice. "I could not be happier anywhere than I am at the Abbey with Lady Cecilia, Lord Lisle; and I should be happier still if—if I did not feel as if I were a burden—but no, that is not the word; you are too kind to regard me as such."

"No, it's not the word, believe me," he said, almost inaudibly. "If you knew—" He pulled himself up in time, and changed the subject; but he had hard work to restrain himself. "Are you quite comfortable? Sure? I'll have a higher rail put to this cart, so that you can lean back—that is, if you like riding in a dog-cart. Cis doesn't; she is rather nervous in one. She is not strong, you know; but she has greatly benefited by our trip. What are they pulling up for? Surely we're not going back yet."

"Mary won't let me come any further," said Cecilia; "she says we will not be back by daylight, and she has only a mile or two to go now."

"Oh, but—" he began, then he glanced at Stella. "Well, perhaps she's right. Miss Mordaunt has only a thin jacket on, and she might catch cold. You ride in front, Cis, so that I can see you don't get up to mischief!"

Cecilia obeyed, with a look at Mary and a laugh; she knew that that was not his reason. Mary rode up to the dog-cart and held Stella's hand with a gentle pressure.

"Cecilia has promised to bring you over to-morrow," she said, in her sweet voice.

When the party had separated, and Mary rode on alone, followed by her groom, the brightness which the presence of her friends had brought to her face died out. She had just been witnessing the opening chapter of a love-story which would run smoothly; and she could not help thinking of her own unhappy one. Where was Edward, and what was he doing? When would she hear from him again?

When she reached home she went straight to the library to give her father an account of the day, and tell him of the

Lisles' promised visit. But as she opened the door, she saw that Ralph the earl was there, and she paused, and stood silent and uncertain.

Ralph was lying back in an easy-chair, smoking one of the big black cigars he favoured, with an important air of self-satisfaction; but Lord Hatherley was seated at the writing-table, his head resting on his hand, his gaze fixed anxiously on a sheet of paper lying before him. Both men started at her entrance; Ralph rose quickly and flung his cigar into the fire, and her father lifted his pale and care-worn face with a half-guilty expression on it.

With a slight bow to Ralph, Mary went to her father and put her hand on his shoulder.

"Father, you promised me you would—rest. I would not have left you alone if I had thought that you would worry yourself with writing."

Hatherley sighed and stroked her hand penitently.

"I know—I know, dear!" he said. "But—but I had some business to see to; and Ralph here came in for a chat, and he has been helping me with his usual kindness."

Mary looked at Ralph as he stood silent with the awkwardness, the restraint which he always felt in her presence.

"My father has been ill, Lord Ratton," she said, gravely, "and he is not fit to transact any business."

"I'm sorry," began Ralph; but Lord Hatherley interposed hastily and even timidly:

"Don't blame Ralph, Molly; it isn't his fault; indeed, he has been persuading me not to worry; but there are some matters I—we—had to see to, and, as I say, he has been helping me. I am very grateful to him, and I am sure you would be if—if you knew."

"What is it, father?" she asked in a low voice.

Hatherley sighed, and seemed about to make some kind of confession, but he caught a warning glance from Ralph, and checked himself.

"Nothing I need worry you about, Molly, dear; and you wouldn't understand if I told you," he said, with a forced laugh. "Thank God, you are not one of the 'new' business women!"

"There's no cause for uneasiness, Lady Mary, I assure you," said Ralph, leaning against the mantel-piece and trying to assume a light, careless manner and tone. "We were just discussing a little matter which needs some consideration; but I think we understand it now, eh, Hatherley?" and he nodded towards him with a smile which, if not exactly insu-

lent, was so significant of a certain self-satisfaction and power that Mary's heart throbbed with indignation, then fell with vague dread.

"Yes—yes," assented Hatherley, with a sigh. "The first bell has rung, Molly, dear; you had better run away and dress."

Mary paused a moment, and looked from her father to Ralph uncertainly. The vague apprehension increased as she regarded him; and with it sprang up something like a vague dislike and distrust of the young man. And at that moment Ralph was not looking his best.

In accordance with that immutable law which we must all recognise, the law which decrees that a man must improve or deteriorate, Ralph had gradually changed for the worse of late. An unwonted luxury, the free run of the Hall cellars, the drinking bouts after a run with the hounds, or a shooting-party, were beginning to tell; his face was growing coarser, his dark eyes had acquired a bold and unpleasant expression. His criminal passion for Mary was also helping to thrust him on the downward course; for no man could live in communion with such thoughts and evil desires as he did without feeling its effects; and Mary, with that instinctive horror of evil which the pure and innocent must always feel, had lately become conscious of a strange sense of abhorrence and distrust whenever she met him.

"Yes, father," she said, gently. "You will come presently?"

"Yes, yes. Perhaps you'll take pity on our solitude, and dine with us, Ralph?"

But Ralph declined; and Mary, with a cold "good-bye" to him, left the room.

Hatherley sank back in his chair, with a sigh that was almost a groan.

"Why didn't you let me tell her, Ralph?" he asked. "I—I have never kept anything from her; and—and I think it's best she should know."

"I don't," responded Ralph, curtly, as he lit a fresh cigar. "Women don't understand business. Besides, I—I don't want Lady Mary to know about this just at present."

"I don't quite see. She would be very grateful if she knew how generously you had come to my assistance."

Ralph twisted his under-lip, and smiled.

"I don't want her gratitude—I mean, that I don't want her to feel that you are under an obligation to me, Hatherley—at least not unless I'm obliged."

Lord Hatherley looked at him with a troubled and uncertain regard, and Ralph fidgetted and frowned under it.

"Ah, well, perhaps I'd better speak out," he said. "Look here, Hatherley; I'm in love with Lady Mary, and want her to marry me."

Lord Hatherley's pale face flushed, but not altogether with pleasure and satisfaction.

And yet, a few weeks ago he would have welcomed such a declaration from the wealthy young Earl of Ratton. But he had seen more of Ralph of late, and—well, there was a vague doubt and misgiving in his mind. But he told himself there was no cause for either, and he rose to his feet and held out his hand to Ralph with an agitated smile.

"My dear Ralph, this—this gives me a great deal of pleasure," he said, brokenly. "I—I won't say that this has taken me completely by surprise; for I will confess to you that the thought has crossed my mind that perhaps our close companionship might result in an attachment between you and Mary." Then he stopped and looked with a troubled frown at Ralph as he leant against the mantel-piece with the self-assurance of the under-bred man. "But — but, Ralph, though there is no one I would more warmly welcome as a husband for my dear girl, I cannot answer for her."

Ralph nodded easily.

"Of course, of course," he said, "Lady Mary must be left a free hand;" but as he said it he watched Hatherley from the corners of his half-closed eyes. "There mustn't be any pressure."

Lord Hatherley moved uneasily.

"Pressure? No, no!" he said, agitatedly. "She must be left quite free to—to accept or decline your offer. Ralph, my girl is the one thing in my life which makes that life worth living. She—she is all I have, and her happiness is just the one object of my life. It is for her—to assure her future, that I—I embarked on this accursed speculation." He groaned and wiped the perspiration from his face as he sank into his chair. "It was to provide for her that I made this unfortunate venture, a venture which has—which would have ruined me, if you had not come to my assistance. As it is, I owe you more—more than I can hope to repay. But for you, I should have had to sell my life interest in the estate, have left Hatherley, and dragged my poor girl from her proper place here into the gutter of some continental city."

He covered his face with his hands for a moment, then

raised it pale and lined. How different a face to that which it had been before Ralph the earl had come on the scene!

"All this you have saved me from. You have behaved most nobly, most generously, though you yourself must have lost heavily by this wretched mine."

Ralph nodded, and did not contradict the statement, though he had taken care to sell his own shares before the slump with which the Golconda had caved in.

"Oh, that's all right. I could afford it," he said, complacently.

"And I could not! That is the terrible difference between us," said poor Hatherley. "I see now what a fool, how wickedly reckless, I have been. If I had only listened to Bulpit!"

Ralph looked down at the bowed head with a half-cynical, half-triumphant smile.

"Oh, you meant all right; and if the water hadn't got into the mine, the thing would have turned up trumps—"

"And my girl would have been provided for, would have been placed beyond the reach of poverty!" said Hatherley, with a groan. "As it is—"

"As it is, there's not much harm done," said Ralph, indifferently. "You've met the present calls—"

"Thanks to you, Ralph!"

—"And you know where to come when the next fall due," continued Ralph, knocking the ash off his cigar. "Make your mind easy about these confounded shares. Look here, Hatherley, if—if Lady Mary says 'yes,' I'll hand you these I O U's with her marriage settlement, and that shall be a big one—as big as you like."

Hatherley rose, with a look of intense relief and gratitude on his pale face; but it faded, and he regarded Ralph with a troubled and doubtful expression.

"That—that is good and noble of you, Ralph," he faltered; "but—but—forgive me if I speak plainly—Mary must know nothing of—of your generous proposal; she must not know that—that my safety, her own future, depends upon her acceptance or refusal of your hand."

Ralph nodded, and suppressed a smile as he saw how unconsciously the distressed father was playing to his hand.

"Of course not! How could you possibly think that I could—"

Hatherley held out his hand impulsively.

"Forgive me, Ralph!" he exclaimed, penitently. "I did you injustice. Forgive me, and make allowance for the con-

dition of my nerves and the natural anxiety of a father that his child should be left free—should not act under compulsion."

Ralph nodded again.

"I understand," he said, shaking Hatherley's trembling hand. "Don't think I want to marry Lady Mary against her will. Don't you say anything about these shares or the I O U's; just leave me to take my chance. I—I hope I've got a chance. There's no one else, is there?"

Lord Hatherley winced at the vulgarity, the coarseness of the question. Had Ralph changed of late in his manner, or was it only his—Hatherley's—fancy?

"No, there is no one else," he said in a low voice. I am quite sure of it. There used to be a—a kind of boy-and-girl flirtation with Bryan's second boy, Edward; but I am sure that it was only a childish fancy—"

Ralph's face darkened, and his teeth closed over his big cigar.

—"Only that," continued Lord Hatherley. "Indeed, it was impossible that there should be anything more serious between them. Edward—he is a thoroughly good fellow and a great favourite of mine, poor boy!—is absolutely without means. And, as you know, he has gone abroad."

Ralph nodded.

"And they don't write?" he said, suspiciously.

Lord Hatherley winced at the suggestion.

"My dear Ralph, if they had, I should have known it. Mary is incapable of a clandestine correspondence!" he exclaimed.

Ralph coloured.

"Of course—of course!" he said. "Well, that's all right. As you say, a match between Lady Mary and that beggarly Edward Bryan would be out of the question; and there's no one else. Well, I shall hope for the best. Faint heart never won fair lady, you know. There's the second bell; I'll be off. No, I can't stay; thanks, all the same; I'll come over presently and try my luck. I've got your promise not to tell her of those I O U's?" he added, keenly, with his hand upon the door.

"Certainly," said Hatherley. "She must not know."

"Oh, mustn't she? We'll see!" muttered Ralph, as he sauntered up the drive.

As he crossed to the Hall, he tasted in anticipation the success which his scheme would bring him, and smiled to himself with cynical complacency. It had been so easy to lure the

simple-minded old man, ignorant of even the A B C of the Stock Exchange, into a ruinous speculation; so simple that Ralph had sometimes felt amazed at the blind confidence which had led his victim into the trap. But he was in it fast enough; and Mary was helpless, Ralph told himself, as he patted the pocket in which he had placed Lord Hatherley's I O U's. If she refused him again, he would be able to put on a pressure which she could not resist. To save her father from being turned out of the Manor and doomed to the exile of a cheap continental watering-place, with all its miseries and degradations, she would marry Ralph—or anyone.

"I've got her fast enough!" he muttered, as he entered his "den," and went straight for the cellaret in the sideboard. His steps tended towards that cellaret quite mechanically now. "I've got her. God! how lovely she looked as she came in, with that dash of colour in her cheeks! It soon went, though, when she caught sight of me, confound her! She doesn't like me, I'm afraid; but that does not matter. It makes my triumph all the sweeter. I'll teach her to be civil and pleasant when I marry her!"

He mixed himself a tall glass of whiskey and soda, and lying back with half-closed eyes in his chair, gave himself up to the delightful vision which opened before him.

"My wife!" he murmured. "The loveliest girl in the county—my wife! When that Bryan comes back, he'll be rather surprised, I fancy. I shall have the laugh on him then, d—n him!"

His dream of future joys and triumphs was rudely dispelled by a knock at the door.

It was Parkins. He held a long paper, something like a play-bill, in his hand.

"I beg your pardon, my lord," he said, in his quiet, irreproachable manner. "A person called this afternoon to ask if you would patronise some kind of a show he is bringing to Market Ratton."

Ralph was in an amiable frame of mind, and nodded pleasantly.

"What kind of a show is it, Parkins?" he asked.

Parkins glanced at the bill in his hand. It was the usual sort of thing; and stated that, at immense expense, a company of London *artistes* would appear for one night only in their tremendously successful entertainment at Market Ratton; and in the centre of the bill the name of the star performer, "*Nita*," was printed in double capitals.

"*Seems a kind* of music-hall affair, my lord," said Parkins

in a non-committal way. "The party left this bill. Perhaps your lordship would like to see it?"

"Oh, don't bother," said Ralph, with a yawn. "Throw it in the waste-paper basket. You can take half a dozen seats if you life. Hi! put some more whiskey in this decanter, will you?"

CHAPTER XXVII.

As he had done coming, Lisle contrived to keep his horse at a slow trot, so that Cecilia and the groom got on well ahead. To Lisle this drive alone with Stella was too precious to be cut short, and he grudged every minute as it fled past. To be alone with this beautiful girl, so close to him, was a joy unspeakable. He wondered how she could sit so still and unconscious of the love which he felt radiating from himself; and now and again he glanced at her face half apprehensively, half longingly. Her unconsciousness of his great passion almost awed him; he wondered whether he should ever find the courage to tell her that he loved her. If she had shown the least consciousness of his condition, if she had blushed when she met the ardour which sometimes, notwithstanding his caution, he could not prevent from shining in his eyes, if she had even shrunk from the touch of his hand, his heart would have been relieved from the dread that possessed him. It seemed to him that anything would have been better than her profound ignorance of his devotion.

He asked himself what she was thinking of, as she sat looking straight before her, with the half-sad, half-wistful expression in her lovely eyes, whose every light and shade was known to him. Was there—was there any other man figuring in that past of hers whose mystery only added a piquant charm to her personality? His heart misgave him sometimes when he asked himself the question; but he reassured himself with the hopefulness of the lover. Surely if there had been any other man, she would have confided in Cecilia.

"Might one offer the large sum of one penny for your thoughts, Miss Mordaunt?" he said, with a smile that was rather wistful.

Stella started and blushed.

"I was thinking of Lady Mary," she said, and with some truth; for though her thoughts as usual had been of Rath and the island, Lady Mary had traversed them. "I was thinking she was one of the prettiest, most beautiful women I have ever seen—but then I have seen so few!—and I was wonder-

ing why she looked so sad. She did look sad; it was not my fancy?"

"No," he said; "I noticed the change in her. When I left home, saw her last, she was a light-hearted girl; now she is a grave and rather melancholy woman. Yes, she is beautiful; she was pretty as a child. But I don't think her the most beautiful woman I have seen," he said in parenthesis, as he glanced at the lovely girl beside him. "Perhaps her father's health—she said that he was not well—troubles her; or there may be something else. She hinted that he was worried."

Stella received the suggested explanation doubtfully.

"I think it is something more than her father's health," she said, with the shrewdness and insight which even the youngest and least experienced of girls will sometimes display. "It is some secret sorrow which concerns herself personally."

Lisle laughed softly.

"Where did you learn such perspicacity?" he asked. "Mary can have no personal trouble; she is the only child of Lord Hatherley, and is watched over and guarded as if she were something too precious for the winds to visit too harshly. She may be in love," he added, after a pause.

"Yes," said Stella, dreamily.

He looked before him thoughtfully.

"Yes, that is it," he said, as if he had suddenly hit the heart of the mystery. "And I can give a shrewd guess as to who it is. Did you hear her speak of a certain Edward Bryan? And did you notice how the colour rushed to her face, though it had gone again in a moment, when we spoke of him? But perhaps you did not notice?"

"Yes, I did," admitted Stella. "Where is he? Does he —care for her?"

"I think so. Yes, I am sure of it," said Lisle, thoughtfully. "Your question calls up to my mind all sorts of little incidents. She and Edward were always together when we were all playmates, and he used to call her his 'little wife' —yes, that is it."

"Where is he, then, and—and does he not care for her?" asked Stella. "But of course he does. Lady Mary is not the girl to give her heart unasked."

"No; you're right," he said. "But if Edward Bryan loves her, that wouldn't make her much the happier. He is the second son. He went out to make his fortune in the colonies somewhere, and I'm afraid that he has not done it."

Stella nodded and sighed.

"You have explained it," she said in her innocently frank way. "It is because she is separated from him, and because there is little hope of his winning her that she looks so sad. I can understand it—to be separated by thousands of miles!"

Her face grew pale, and the long lashes veiled her eyes.

"How completely and definitely you have settled the case," he said, with an uneasy smile. "Where did you gather this experience of life and its troubles, Miss Mordaunt? You are young to possess such knowledge of the human heart."

"I am not too young to know what separation means, Lord Lisle," she said in a low voice. "Sorrow is not reserved for old age."

"No; that's true," he assented, almost bitterly. "Youth has its griefs and disappointments. But it is a hard saying on such a lovely evening as this. Do you see the sunset behind the pines?"

"I was looking at it," said Stella.

She did not add that it had recalled, with a poignant longing, the sunset behind the firs on the island—the sunset at which she and Rath had so often gazed; but she shivered under the memory.

"You are not cold?" he asked, anxiously, as he felt the tremor of her arm, so close to his.

"Oh, no!"

"But I'm afraid you are. The evenings are growing chilly. Let me put this wrap more closely round you. Stay! Perhaps you'd be warmer if you had something to do. You have never driven, have you? I think you said you had not. Take the reins for a little while. It will warm you."

"Shall I?" she asked, with all a girl's pleasure at the prospect of a novel employment. He changed seats with her, and she took the reins, and his heart rose at the laugh of innocent pleasure.

"Hold them a little tighter," he said. "Hold them this way. Allow me;" and he arranged the reins properly in her small hands. His whole being thrilled at the contact, but Stella was all unconscious.

"This is my first experience in driving," she said. "It is delightful to know that this powerful horse is under one's control—"

"Just feel its mouth a little harder," he suggested, as the brown filly, aware of the change, broke into a canter. "It

has its nose turned towards its stable, and is anxious to reach its corn. Like this—see?"

And he seized on the opportunity of touching her hand again.

"I see! How strong it is. Yes; it is delightful!"

"Wait until you are on the back of a good horse!" he remarked, resolving that she should be within the next few days. "You will say that that is delightful indeed. We shall have you riding to hounds this winter, Miss Mordaunt—at least, I hope so. Cecilia is too nervous to make a good huntswoman; but I don't think that will be the case with you."

"No, I'm not nervous," said Stella, absorbed in her work.

"And you will make a good whip," he said, looking at her with admiration as she gradually got the "touch" and command of the horse. "You have a good nerve, I see."

"Have I?" she said, naturally gratified. "Rath always said I could learn anything, if I put my mind to it."

He flushed, then went pale.

"May I ask who 'Rath' is?" he said in a low voice.

Stella flushed hotly, then went white.

"He—he was someone I knew," she said, as calmly as she could, her heart beating fast, her eyes growing sad and wistful.

"An—old friend?" he asked, his heart beating as fast as hers, and with a sad misgiving.

"No," she replied, steadying her voice. "I—I only knew him for a little while. Am I driving properly?"

"Quite well," he said, mechanically. Then, after a pause, he said in a voice suddenly grown husky: "Miss Mordaunt—"

Stella glanced at him with knit brows, and waited.

—"I've no right to ask you, but—but this is the first time you have mentioned the name of anyone, you know—will you tell me who this Rath is?"

She was silent for nearly a minute, then she said:

"He is the greatest friend I have. He—he saved my life, when death seemed so near as to render hope impossible. He is—oh! why do you press me, Lord Lisle?—he is the greatest, truest friend anyone ever possessed!"

Lisle looked straight ahead.

"A friend. Nothing—nothing more?" he asked, and held his breath.

Stella grew pale, and her brows came together.

"Nothing more," she replied in a low voice.

Lisle drew a long breath of relief.

"You—you frightened me," he said in a low voice.

Stella turned her eyes upon him with innocent surprise.

"Frightened you? I don't understand, Lord Lisle," she said.

He met her innocent gaze with a passionate appeal in his eyes.

"Oh! don't you know? Can't you guess?" he stammered in his agitation. "Have you been so blind as not to see?"

Stella still gazed at him with unconscious wonder; then suddenly she felt the reins slacken in her hand, and, looking for the cause, saw a hare rushing across the road and nearly under the horse's nose.

Before she could speak, the horse shied and reared, then started at a terrified gallop.

They were driving down a narrow road through one of the Abbey woods, a road so narrow that the trunks of the elms trenched on to it, and a slight swerve to right or left would have caught the wheels of the dog-cart in the trunks of the trees and brought disaster. Feeling only Stella's light hold on it, the horse, encouraged, or frightened, by its driver's weakness, bolted outright. The dog-cart swayed from side to side as it struck against the bank, and it only wanted a tree with a trunk projecting a little more than its fellows to cause a spill.

"Give me the reins," said Lisle, quietly.

But as quietly Stella shook her head.

"Let me!" she said, setting her teeth, as she had set them when Rath had said some task was beyond her strength. "I am stronger than you think; I am sure I can hold it."

Lisle's prudence was overcome by his sense of admiration. She looked so lovely, so resolute, as she leant back and gripped the reins, her eyes flashing, her cheeks, not pale with fright, but suffused with the colour of resolution.

"Are you sure?" he asked, anxiously.

"Quite sure!" she responded. "If I am to learn to drive, now is the great opportunity. Please don't take the reins from me! I am quite sure—how it pulls! Yes—yes, I am quite sure I can hold it!"

"Be careful of the turn," he said, yielding to her request, though he felt that he was rash in doing so. "There is a turn at the bend of the hill, and—"

Stella laughed. Her face was flushed with excitement; her eyes dazzling in their brightness.

"I'm *not* afraid!" she said, between her teeth. "If you *will trust me.*"

"I would trust you with this life and the life hereafter!" he responded, hotly. "But mind the turn!"

"That sounds like 'Put your trust in Providence, but keep your powder dry!'" she retorted, with a laugh.

He looked at her admiringly. A girl who could quote Cromwell at such a juncture was indeed a heroine, a goddess to be worshipped.

"Well—be careful!" he said. "If anything should happen—"

"Put it down to me!" she said, lightly, as she leant still farther back, and strained at the runaway.

"What pluck! what spirit you have!" he said, under his breath. "There is no one like you—no one!"

"If you mean that I'm not afraid; I'm not!" she said. "Rath once said—"

"Rath again!" he muttered.

—"That he had only to dare me not to do a thing— Is that the corner? She won't answer to the rein. She won't—"

Before she had finished the sentence, the off-wheel caught in a projecting trunk of one of the pines, and with a sudden lift and jerk—the lift and jerk which Lisle knew well; for this was not his first experience of a spill—the dog-cart went over. He was the first to pitch out, but he fell amongst the bushes, and, after a moment, rose unhurt. When, somewhat dazed, he looked round, he saw Stella lying full length near him, and the dog-cart on its side, entangled in the trees. The horse stood, like the well-bred animal it was, shaking and trembling at a little distance, with the broken shafts still hanging to it.

He sprang to Stella and went on his knees beside her. She was lying as she had been thrown, with her arms spread out, her face deathly white, and her eyes closed.

She looked so "dead" that the heart of the man who loved her seemed suddenly to cease beating, and for a moment or two he was incapable of anything more than gazing at her with a frenzied despair. Then he raised her head to his knee, and, still only half conscious, he tenderly swept the hair from her forehead and called to her in accents of anguished love:

"Stella! Stella! are you hurt? My dearest! my dearest! Oh, my God! she is dead! What shall I do?"

His arms closed round her, and he drew her slim, slight figure to him in an ecstacy of terror; then he remembered a rill of water that ran down the hill near the spot, and he went and soaked his handkerchief and bathed her brow with it. After a moment or two Stella came round. She was still

only half conscious, and Lisle, beside himself with terror and love, continued to address her.

"Stella, my dearest!" he cried, hoarsely, "are you hurt? Do you know me? Speak to me! It was all my fault—all mine! What a fool I am! Stella, speak to me! Oh, my dearest, my darling! Speak to me, Stella!"

She opened her eyes and looked at him blankly.

"What—what has happened?" she breathed. "Is—is Lord Lisle hurt?"

This regard for him broke down his last remnant of reserve.

"No; I am all right," he said, passionately. "It is you—you! Stella, if you are hurt I shall never forgive myself. It was all my fault!"

"Fault?" she said, weakly, as she strove to rise, but vainly, for his strong arm restrained her. "It was my fault—all mine. I ought not to have tried to hold it. And you—are you hurt?"

"I!" he said, with the keenest self-reproach. "I am not hurt in the least. But you—you! And I would willingly have died to save you from a moment's pain."

She raised herself on her elbow.

"There—there is nothing much the matter, then?" she said, trying to speak lightly; but a spasm of pain choked her utterance. "Is—is the horse hurt?"

"Never mind the horse," he said, half distraught with fear on her account. "It is yourself I am thinking of."

"I am all right," she said again. "Please let me stand up; then I shall see."

He let her rise to her feet; but as she staggered from the weakness following the swoon, he caught her to his breast and held her there while his heart spoke out freely.

"Stella, my angel, my love! Yes, yes; I love you! I have loved you since the first day we took you on board the yacht. Ah! don't shrink from me! Let me tell you—I must tell you now—I love you! You are all the world to me; the one woman I want—I want!"

She tried to draw away from him, but she was still weak from the sudden fall, from the faintness which is kin to death.

"Let me tell you, Stella! I must! I love you! All my life is bound up with you. Until you came I did not know what life meant, what it held. Now I know—I know! Stella, listen to me! You are hurt and weak—it is not fair;

but I cannot help it. I love you—I love you! Be my wife, Stella! My dearest! my dearest!"

Stella heard the frenzied words through a kind of dream, a mist. This man was asking her to give him that which belonged to Rath—Rath, alone on his island.

She shuddered as she put the hair from her eyes and struggled for the breath which comes so painfully, so slowly from a sharp swoon.

"Oh! let us go!" she said, helplessly.

"Yes, yes!" he assented. "We are not far from home. But tell me, Stella; may I hope? I only ask for hope!"

She looked at him, at his face, white and working.

"No, no!" she panted. "I—I cannot! Take me home!"

He supported her, his eyes fixed upon her in an ecstacy of longing and despair.

"You mean—"

"I cannot! I cannot!" she breathed, her eyes evading his. "Please take me home. I—I am very sorry; but I cannot!"

His face grew white.

"You mean that? Then—tnen there is someone else?" he said, hoarsely.

Stella hung her head and drew away from him; then she raised her eyes, full of pain and something like shame.

"Let us go!" she breathed, almost inaudibly. "Please let us go; and—and do not let us say another word!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

LISLE turned his head away for a moment or two, until he could recover from the blow which Fate had dealt him. Only an hour ago and he had been, if not sanguine, at least hopeful, of winning this beautiful girl whom he loved, and now there was no hope left in his breast!

"I—I can walk quite well; I am not hurt," she faltered, with downcast eyes, and that sense of regret almost amounting to guilt which every true-hearted woman feels after refusing the proposal of a good and honourable man. His arm dropped to his side, and he went and cleared the horse from the débris and led it beside them. They were silent for a while, then he said:

"I want to say something, Stella—Miss Mordaunt. It is *the last time I shall* refer to—to my love for you; and I would *not speak of it again*, for I see that it is quite hopeless."

"*I am sorry—sorry!*" said Stella, with something like a

sob. "If I had known! But I never guessed! If anyone had told me that you—you cared for me, I should not have believed it; I should have—yes, laughed at them! Oh! don't you believe me? Think of it, Lord Lisle! You are an English nobleman, and I am—only a waif, a nobody, quite beneath you."

"What has that to do with it?" he said, ruefully, and with an unconscious irony. "You are to me the most lovely and lovable of women; you are—but I have promised not to speak of my feelings again, and I will not. I know you too well."

"You have known me only a few weeks," said Stella, her misery almost swallowed up by her amazement at this sudden love of his.

"A few weeks, a few months, a few years, it is all one and the same to me," he said, gravely, and with his eyes bent on the ground, as if he could not trust himself to look upon her face. "Some love may need time to germinate; mine sprang full-grown within the first hour of my seeing you; it was love at first sight; but, Stella, I am breaking my promise! What I want to say is that I know you too well to cherish any hope of your changing your mind—"

"No, I—I could not change," said poor Stella, her face white and troubled.

He nodded, and his lips twitched as if with a spasm of physical pain.

"I am not so foolish as to cherish any such hope," he said. "But I want to tell you that I will never, by word or look, remind you of—of my love for you. You need not be afraid that I shall harass you, that I shall cause you pain by a display of my own disappointment."

She looked at him through a mist of sudden tears.

"I know that you will be all that is kind and considerate, that you could not be otherwise, Lord Lisle," she said. "Oh, if you knew how bitterly I feel my own unworthiness, that I feel ungrateful and hard-hearted and callous."

"No, no!" he said, quickly, and with something like self-reproach. "You must not say, must not think that! It was no fault of yours, Stella; you cannot help being what you are. It is my Fate!" the cry broke from him, not loudly, but with a mingling of involuntary bitterness and despair which went straight to Stella's heart, and she covered her face with her hands.

"Now I have made you cry," he said, remorsefully. "What a brute, what a selfish brute I am. Please don't! There isn't a man in the world worth your tears, Stella; not

one, believe me! And—and for Heaven's sake, don't permit yourself to think that you are in any way to blame, because you are not, not in the very least. We won't say another word about it, not a word. Are you sure you are not hurt?" he broke off suddenly and with anxiety; for he fancied she had limped a little as they climbed the hill.

"No, no!" she said, almost impatiently, "I am not in the least hurt, and if I had been I should have deserved it. Look at the damage I have done in my ignorance!"

She was thinking for the moment of the ruined dog-cart; but it will be pardoned Lisle if he applied her words to his own half-broken heart.

"Not a word of self-reproach, please!" he said. "It was all my fault. Here is the house— Hallo, Cis! It's all right!" he called out as cheerily as he could in answer to the alarmed question which sprang to Cecilia's lips as she came to the door to meet them:

"Why are you walking, and where is the dog-cart?"

"We've had a spill," he said, forcing a laugh. "Shied at a hare running across the path; off wheel caught in trunk of tree, and out we came. I'm thankful to say Miss Mordaunt is not hurt, but she has had a shock, and I'm going to insist upon her taking a glass of wine before she goes upstairs to dress."

Cecilia was full of tender anxiety on Stella's account; but Stella, though pale, declared that there was not the least thing the matter with her. But her hand shook as she took the wine from Lisle, and Lady Cecilia insisted upon her drinking it quickly and going upstairs at once to rest.

When Stella had gone, Cecilia turned to her brother.

"What has happened?" she asked, with the quick intuition of the strange sympathy which existed between them.

He did not blink the question.

"I told her," he said, simply, "and she has said 'No.'"

"Cecil!"

She stretched out her hand to him as if she shared the pain with which his heart ached.

"It's all right, Cis!" he said, almost as if it were she who needed sympathy. "I had no right to think I should win her. All along I have felt that I was going to fail; just as I felt that day I rode in the Point to Point. It is a strange feeling, and there is no accounting for it; but sometimes I feel it strongly. Of course I've had a bad fall, it is a regular crumpler; but I shall get over it, though just at this moment

I feel as if I never should!" he added, ruefully. "But, Cis, there is one thing you and I have got to do."

"Yes?" she asked, sorrowfully. "If there were only something I could do or say!"

"To help me? There isn't. The rest is silence, as Hamlet says; but, Cis, we have to think of her. This—this refusal must make no difference between us and Stella; you will not let it, will you, Cis? I rely on you! I know how she is feeling at this very moment. She spoke of ingratitude—as if it were her duty to love me because we had rescued and helped her, poor girl—and she will feel that she has brought trouble on me—and on you, too. She will need all your tenderness and consideration; and I know she will have it. You will be very gentle with her, for my sake—ah, but you will for her own, for I know that you love her, Cis!"

"Yes," she said in a low voice. "I share your disappointment—my poor Cecil!"

"Then share my care of her!" he said, quietly but earnestly. "Perhaps it will be better not to let her know that I have told you. Let things go on just as usual. I'm not going to wear the willow; she shall see that I can bear my fate like a man, and that if I cannot have her love I am willing to be content with her friendship. Better keep away from her for a little while; she will want to be alone, I fancy. Yes; we came a complete spill, and for the moment I thought she was hurt; the shock made her faint, and—and—it was while I held her in my arms that I lost control of myself and told her." Then, for a moment, he broke down, "Oh, my God! what shall I do with the rest of my life!" he cried in a low, hoarse voice.

* * * * * * *

When Stella had got to her room she threw herself down beside the bed and hid her face in her hands. Lord Lisle's declaration had come so suddenly, so unexpectedly that she was still confused and unnerved by it. But presently she began to realise all that it meant. She had brought trouble and sorrow to the brother and sister who had rescued and befriended her; all unwittingly she had returned evil for good; and the very sight of her must be painful not only to Lord Lisle, but to Lady Cecilia.

She rose, her face pale and set, her mind possessed of a sudden resolution. It was impossible for her to remain at the Abbey; she must go at once. Notwithstanding her few weeks of civilisation—or perhaps because they were so few—Stella was still the impulsive child of the island; and her old habit

of carrying out a resolution at once had been strengthened by the influence of Rath, to whom to conceive an idea and act on it were as second nature.

She felt as if she could not meet the sadness in Lord Lisle's eyes, the pain which would be there and in Cecilia's, try as they might to conceal it from her. She had learnt something of love's anguish—for was she not separated from Rath?—and she knew that though Lord Lisle had told her that he would never address another word of love to her, that her presence would be a cause of distress to him.

"No, I must go!" she said to herself; and she paced up and down in a tumult of emotion; but presently she felt a slight pain in her ankle, and sank into a chair. But it was only to rise again and begin to change her dress for the plain blue serge which Lady Cecilia had lent her on board the "Kingfisher."

"I must take her clothes. I must even take the money they have lent me," she said to herself, with a choking sensation in her throat. "It would only give them more pain if I left the house penniless. But some day I will pay it back; but I can never undo the harm I have wrought, never atone for the pain I have caused them. Oh, why couldn't I say 'Yes'? He is good and noble in more than rank, and—he loves me! But I could not!"—she stretched out her arms to her reflection in the glass—"I could not!"

While her trembling fingers were fastening the dress, there came a knock at the door, and Susy's voice asking if she could come in.

Stella went to the door, and at sight of her white face and swollen eyes—for half unconsciously Stella had been crying—the girl uttered a cry of dismay. Stella drew her into the room and shut the door quickly.

"Oh, miss! what is the matter? I heard that there had been an accident. Are you hurt?" exclaimed Susy, all in a flutter of anxiety and alarm, for Stella's sympathy with the girl's love trouble had won her heart.

"Yes; I upset the dog-cart, and Lord Lisle and I were turned out; but no one is hurt, Susy."

"Oh, are you sure, miss? You look so white."

"I am quite sure I am not hurt; but I have been shaken, and I've a bad headache, Susy, and I don't think I'll come down again this evening."

"No, no, miss," said Susy, full of affectionate pity and sympathy. "I'll tell her ladyship, and I'll bring you up something. You'll go to bed at once, miss, won't you?"

"Yes, perhaps; I'll see. I'm a bad one to go to bed unless I'm obliged, Susy," said Stella, colouring, for her heart reproached her for deceiving this girl. "You shall bring me up a cup of tea in—yes, in half an hour's time."

"Yes, miss," assented Susy, eagerly; "and you'll try to go to sleep? I'll take care you're not disturbed."

Stella turned away. The girl was, all unconsciously, helping her in the plan which was forming in her mind. Directly she had gone, Stella went to the inlaid writing-table—the daintiest in the house, and chosen for her by Lord Lisle himself—and hastily wrote a few lines.

She wrote and rewrote them; it was so difficult, such heart-breaking work, to say a farewell which should not seem callous and ungrateful! But at last, though unsatisfied with it, she enclosed the following note in an envelope and addressed it to Lady Cecilia:

"DEAR LADY CECILIA,—I am leaving the Abbey because—ah, because I must go! To stay would only make you and Lord Lisle sad and unhappy. I am very wretched, and all the more so because I cannot tell you how grateful I am to you for all your goodness to me. I know you will not feel sorry for having picked me up on the sea that day, but just now, while I am writing this, I could almost wish that you had left me to perish. I can only wish you good-bye with all my love and gratitude, and I beg and pray that you will let me go, and will not attempt to follow me or persuade me to return. I could not come back. Tell Lord Lisle—no, there is no need to tell him; he will understand that I shall never cease to think of his goodness and nobleness.

"STELLA."

Susy brought up the tea, just as Stella had finished this, as she deemed it, poor and inadequate letter of farewell.

"Shall I help you undress, miss?" asked Susy, anxiously. "Let me bathe your head with eau-de-Cologne. I will sit by you, miss, until you go to sleep."

Stella forced a laugh, and taking the girl by the shoulders, gently pushed her towards the door.

"You silly girl!" she said. "I am all right, shall be all right when—when I have rested!" Then she almost broke down, and half hysterically drew the girl towards her and kissed her. "Susy, you are a tender-hearted little thing! I don't wonder at Tom falling in love with you. There! go away and leave me. And be sure you don't let anyone—*mind, anyone!*—come to me till the morning!"

The girl, confused and delighted by the kiss, ran out of the room half laughing, half crying, and Stella locked the door and completed her preparations; and they were few and simple. She had only to put on her hat and jacket, and wait until the Lisles went in to dinner, and, so to speak, the coast was clear.

The dressing-bell had gone some time ago, and presently she heard the dinner-bell. She waited for five or ten minutes, then she opened the door softly and stole out on to the corridor, like, as she told herself, somewhat bitterly, a thief in the night. And was she not a thief? Had she not stolen, though all innocently, the heart of the man who had saved her from death and offered to share his rank and fortune with her, to make her his wife?

She watched the servants cross and enter the dining-room, then she cautiously descended to the landing below the corridor. From here a passage and stairs led to the small hall which opened on to the garden. It was only used by the servants, and they were all, as she knew, engaged in the kitchen or the dining-room. Quite unobserved she gained the small hall and let herself into the garden, closing the door softly after her.

It was dark now, but she kept in the shadow of the shrubbery, and avoiding the avenue and the main lodge, where she might have been seen by the lodge-keeper, she crossed the park and got on to the road through one of the smaller gates. Instinctively she took the direction opposite to Market Ratton, and she walked on quickly and with a throbbing heart. The darkness, the loneliness of the road began to tell upon her in a few minutes, and once she paused and stretched out her hands, murmuring:

"Oh, Rath! Rath! if I could only go to you!" Then she set her teeth hard and fought against the sudden weakness. "I must not give way!" she said to herself, resolutely. "I must prove myself worthy of Rath's teaching. He used to laugh at me and call me a girl when I cried because I failed in something he did so easily. Oh! if he were only here now to laugh at me! But he would not laugh," she thought, as she remembered how tenderly he had taken her to his breast when she was overwhelmed by her mother's death, how gentle and patient he was with her when she was ill or in pain.

So she strove to keep up her heart, and tried to form some plan for the immediate future. Lady Cecilia had insisted upon giving her a quarter's salary in advance, and this money Stella had reluctantly brought with her; it should be repaid

when she reached Rath. With this money she would pay her train-fare to London, and live until she found some employment.

She tried to think of what she could do, tried to think of anything but Lord Lisle and Cecilia; but they haunted her. Presently she became conscious of a strange pain in her ankle, and discovered that she was walking slowly and with difficulty. She stopped and leant against a stile for a few minutes; but when she began to walk again the pain had increased, and she felt that the foot was swelling. Another girl would have given in at once; but Stella had been well trained by Rath. She realised that she should not be able to reach the next station down the line, as she had intended doing, and that she must perforce make for the one at Market Ratton. She turned up one of the lanes from the high-road, and tried, by throwing as much of her weight as possible upon the other foot, to relieve the injured one; but as she limped into a street leading to the town, the pain became so unendurable that she was forced to stop and lean against the railings of one of the small cottages which lined the street.

It occurred to her that, perhaps, the pain would be lessened if she could take off her boot—she had often gone about the island barefooted and would not miss the boot—but when, seated on the brick-work of the railing, she tried to unfasten the laces, the pain at her ankle made her feel sick and faint, and she was obliged to clutch the railing for support.

At this moment a woman came down the street and stopped at the gate of the cottage. Stella tried to rise and murmur an apology, but the words slid into an involuntary moan of anguish.

The woman looked at her keenly.

"What is the matter?" she asked. Her voice was low and colourless, but not unkindly, and Stella, trying to speak cheerfully, said:

"I—I'm afraid I've hurt my ankle; but—but it is not much; I'm sure it is not much."

She managed to rise, but she had to support herself by the railing, and the pain brought beads of perspiration to her face.

The woman saw its pallor by the faint light of the street lamp.

"You are hurt worse than you think," she said, very quietly, and in the same subdued and colourless voice. "You'd better let me see what is the matter. No, not out here, it is too dark," she added, as Stella sank down again.

"Come inside. Take my arm. You see, you couldn't stand alone," for Stella had swayed and staggered as she gratefully caught at the proffered arm.

The woman knocked at the door, and when it was opened by a maid-servant of the lodging-house type, she said:

"Give me some matches, and send us up the supper; I've got a friend with me."

The girl nodded apathetically, and the woman having helped Stella up the narrow stairs, took her into a small sitting-room and led her to a sofa.

"Don't move till I light the lamp," she said.

Stella obeyed helplessly; and when the lamp was lit, her benefactor knelt down and, with a table knife, cut the laces.

"I shall have to cut the boot away, your foot is swollen so," she said. "I shall give you some pain, I'm afraid."

"No, no; I don't mind!" said Stella, trying to smile.

As the operation was performed with calm but gentle deftness, Stella, notwithstanding her pain, regarded the operator curiously.

She was a tall and well-made woman, with well-formed features belonging to a face which had been beautiful and was still handsome. It was as pale as Stella's own, but with a different pallor, and the contrast afforded by the dark eyes and hair made the whiteness of her face all the more striking.

As she looked up, Stella saw that she was not as old as she had at first thought, and guessed that privation or grief had given the face its expression of premature age.

"It is as I thought," said the woman. "You have sprained your ankle. How did you do it?"

"I met with an accident," said Stella.

"An accident? How long ago?"

"How long?" said Stella, putting her hand to her head confusedly. "I don't remember—yes, this afternoon, evening—some hours ago."

The woman looked at her with a kind of dull surprise and pity.

"You must have suffered agonies," she remarked.

"No," said Stella, "only the last few minutes. I—I did not know that there was anything the matter."

The woman looked at her steadily.

"You are a woman," she said. "A man would have fainted with the pain; but, as it was, you were nearly fainting. Drink that."

She gave her a glass of water, and Stella drank it eagerly.

"I am better now," she said. "I can't tell you how

grateful I am to you for your kindness! I will go on my way now; my foot is much easier."

The woman smiled in a sadly wise way.

"You could not walk across this room," she said; "put your foot down and try."

Stella proved the truth of the assertion, and sank down again, looking up with dismay at the Good Samaritan.

"Oh! what shall I do?" she exclaimed. "I *must* go."

"Where are you going?"

"To London," said Stella, in too much pain and distress to hesitate. "I want to go by the night train."

The woman shook her head.

"Is it so important?" she asked. "Will your friends expect you? It is too late to telegraph."

Stella coloured.

"I have no friends to expect—there is no one to meet me," she said. Then, after a pause, she went on: "I'm going in search of a situation. I—I have just left one. I'm afraid I can't tell you."

The woman made a significant gesture with her thin but well-formed hand.

"I don't want to know, don't intend to ask any questions," she said, quietly. "I can see you are young and inexperienced, and in trouble. I'm not too old to feel for you—I'm younger than I look—and I've been in trouble; worse trouble than yours, I'll be bound. If you like to stay here until you are quite well, you are welcome. But perhaps you've somewhere else to go?"

Stella tried to express her gratitude.

"No, I've nowhere else to go, and I will stay thankfully," she said, fighting with her tears. "But—but I do not wish anyone to know where I am," she added, colouring painfully.

The woman nodded.

"I understand—at least I understand you want to keep quiet; and I don't want to know the reason."

"I—I have done nothing wrong," said poor Stella, shamefacedly.

The woman smiled with a mixture of sadness and bitterness.

"I don't know that it would make any difference to me if you had," she said, with real or affected indifference. "My experience is that the ones who do wrong are the ones that don't suffer. Here comes the supper. Take off your hat and jacket and lie back and rest; I'll bring you something. Tell the landlady I shall want that other bedroom," she said to the servant-girl. "Now, here's some tea and an egg.

Oh, I don't suppose you're hungry, you're in too much pain; but you'd better try and eat something, if it's ever so little."

When she had brought the things to Stella she took off her own hat and jacket, and Stella saw that the woman was indeed quite young.

"You are very good to me," she said. "I want to tell you my name; it is Stella Mordaunt—but I hope you will not —I beg you not to tell anyone. I—I—"

The woman laughed a short, weary kind of laugh.

"My dear girl, I'm not in the least curious, and I'll promise you to keep my mouth shut. My name's Nita—but I daresay you've heard it; it's well—I was going to say too well known."

"No, I've not heard it before," said Stella.

"No? Oh, well, you'll see it on the posters large enough —or you would have done if you'd got as far as the station. I am the great Nita, the serio-comic *artiste;* I've come down here with a music-hall company; they've gone to the hotel, but I always take lodgings; I like to be alone. It's a queer fancy, but I can afford it. There, you needn't look so unhappy; when I said 'alone' I meant away from the rest of the crew. I'm glad enough of your company."

CHAPTER XXIX.

NITA waited until Stella had, with difficulty, managed to eat some food, then she cut away the stocking from the injured foot and applied a wet compress.

"I'm afraid I hurt you, but I can't very well help it," she remarked.

"I was marvelling at the skilful and gentle way you have done it," said Stella, who had grown white under the operation, but had succeeded in repressing any other sign of pain. "Were you ever a hospital nurse?"

Nita laughed shortly and shook her head.

"No," she replied. "I've been a great many things, but not that; but I'm used to accidents of this sort. Some of us are always slipping on the stage or getting a strain through overdancing, and we learn what to do; for a doctor isn't always at hand, and if he is there isn't always time to wait for him."

Stella, while looking on, had noticed a wedding-ring on Nita's thin hand, and she looked now anxiously and gratefully into the face which wore that saddest of all expressions, the hopeless resignation which is next door to callousness.

One sees it in the eyes of those who have lost the joy of living, who have suffered from the hope deferred which makes the heart sick.

"You will feel easier in the morning; and if the sprain is all that's the matter with you, you'll soon be all right," said Nita. "But"—and she glanced at Stella with a mixture of shrewdness and pity—"you look as if you had had some trouble."

Stella's eyes grew moist; physical pain had made her weak and very susceptible to sympathy.

"Yes," she said, trying to speak quite steadily; "I—I have had some trouble, a very great trouble. I—I have lost, been parted from, a friend, the best friend in the world."

"Then it must be a woman," said Nita, as she rose and took up a stage-dress, and began to mend or alter it.

Stella shook her head.

"No; it was a man," she said in a low voice.

Nita raised her handsome, care-worn face for a moment.

"A man? It is the first time I ever heard of a man being a woman's best friend," she said, with a suppressed bitterness. "As a rule, he is her worst enemy. I speak from experience. Yes, I'm married; I saw you looking at my wedding-ring."

Stella blushed.

"I beg your pardon!" she faltered.

"Oh, there's nothing to apologise for," said Nita. "I'm married, and I'm not a widow—that I know of."

"That you know of!" exclaimed Stella.

"No," said Nita, quite calmly. "My husband left me—deserted me."

Stella uttered a little startled cry of sympathy, and Nita laughed, and bit off the end of her cotton in a matter-of-fact way.

"Oh, that's not uncommon—at least not with women of my sort," she said. "Mine's quite an ordinary case; you read scores of similar ones in the newspapers. I'm sure I don't know why I've told you, I don't generally allude to it, but—but I suppose your being so down on your luck, and—and so young and under my care made me tell you. You're not married, I can see."

Stella blushed again.

"No, I'm not married," she assented.

"Then don't be," said Nita, coolly. "I often wonder why young girls are so anxious to have a husband, when they can see for themselves that not one married woman in a hun-

dred is happy; but it's the way of humanity, I suppose. Women were sent into the world to be the slaves of men."

"Not all men, surely?" said Stella.

"Most of them, anyway," rejoined Nita. "Do you like this dress?" she held up the garment, a rather striking combination of crimson satin and black lace. "It's one I'm going to wear to-morrow night when I sing 'I'm a Society Girl'—sing and dance. It tells of the life of a London lady who is supposed to work harder, going to balls and concerts and that sort of thing, than the women who make shirts and go out charing; and the girls who listen to it believe it, though some of them work in some such way sixteen hours a day. It gratifies them to hear that it is not all beer and skittles for the lady swells. I beg your pardon for the slang—you mustn't mind it. I hear it all day, and it comes natural."

"Why should you apologise?" said Stella. "I understood what you meant. And are you going to wear any other dress?" she asked, deeply interested, notwithstanding her pain, in the strangely novel life of her benefactress.

"Oh, yes; I wear four. Here's one—a man's suit. I'm a young sailor who has run away to sea because his sweetheart jilted him." She laughed bitterly. "They mostly run away to sea to jilt the sweetheart. You'll see portraits of me in my various costumes on the posters and bills when you go out," she added, with a touch of cynical pride which seemed sadder to Stella than anything else about her. "I'm a big success in my line, you see."

"I am very glad," said Stella.

"Are you? Thank you. It's more than I am. It came too late—it usually does, so they say. If it had come a few months earlier— But I don't know. I don't suppose things would have been very different, or I should have been any happier. I should always have known and felt that he was staying with me because it was worth his while."

"Your husband, do you mean?" said Stella in a low voice.

Nita bent lower over her work.

"Yes," she said in a monotonous tone, as if she were answering any ordinary question. "Shocks you, doesn't it? It is evident you don't know anything of the profession. Almost all of us have got a husband living on her salary, and most of the women think I am lucky in being a grass widow. There! I didn't mean to whine to you, or to bore you. No doubt you've got enough of your own trouble to think of."

"You don't bore me," said Stella. "I'm so sorry for you! How unhappy you must be!"

Nita laughed shortly.

"Oh, no, I'm not," she said; then her lips twitched, and the lids dropped over the dark eyes, as if she had been suddenly smitten by a painful memory. "But I was at first," she went on, reluctantly. "You see, I was foolish enough to be fond of him, and while we were together I didn't mind how much I worked, or how rough a time we had. And it was a rough time. I hadn't made my name then, as I said, and I had to work hard to earn just enough for us—to keep body and soul together; but I was content if he threw me a kind word now and again, and that wasn't often; for men of his sort haven't many kind words to throw to their wives when the beer and tobacco runs short and the cupboard's empty."

"But—but why didn't he work too?" asked Stella in her innocence.

Nita shrugged her shoulders.

"Work was scarce, and, when it wasn't, he didn't care about it. He left me to do the work for both of us; and one day when I was looking for it, he went off."

"Oh!" breathed Stella.

"Yes; he left a note—just a few lines—saying that he was off to the Klondike to make his fortune. And I was fool enough to fret after him. If he had only said 'good-bye,' if he had only given me one kiss—but a short note! Bah! why am I raking it all up again?" she broke off, with a harsh laugh; but Stella saw a tear in the fierce eyes which belied the cynical bitterness of the voice.

Stella was silent for a moment or two, then she said, timidly:

"And—and haven't you heard—"

"Not likely!" said Nita. "Oh, yes, I expected to hear. I stayed in the same diggings for months, and I've left my address there—thinking, yes, hoping—that perhaps he'd got stone broke and work his way back. I was foolish then, you see; but I've got wiser since. I expect he made that fortune."

Stella leant forward in her eagerness.

"Oh, but—but perhaps you are wronging him by such a thought! Perhaps he failed, and is poor still, and too proud."

Nita rose and shook out her dress.

"Too proud to come to me for money?" she said, quietly. "He couldn't have changed to that extent in this short time.

No, miss, he wasn't the sort of man to own that sort of pride."

"He—he may be ill," said Stella.

Nita shook her head.

"He'd have written. He knew I'd have come out, if I'd had to work my fingers to the bone to get to him. You don't like to say that he might be dead, I can see; but he's not dead. He's not the one to risk his life."

She saw Stella shudder, and for an instant the care-worn face flamed and the eyes flashed.

"You think me a hard-hearted woman, I can see!" she said, with suppressed passion; "and perhaps you're right; but if you'd been deserted as I've been, and by the man you loved and worked for, you'd be hard-hearted. I was as soft and gentle as—as you, once."

The colour died out of her face and the flame from her dark eyes.

"I beg your pardon," she said, biting her lips, "but it all came back to me as we were talking, and I—I lost myself. If he's dead, as you suggest, then I've suffered too much to mourn for him—and there's many a woman who could say the same. Let me see if your foot's easier."

She made the examination with a gentleness in strange contrast to her recent outburst of passion; but Stella felt the thin hand tremble as it touched her foot, and, moved by a pitying impulse, she leant forward and touched Nita's forehead with her lips.

"I am so sorry for you!" she said.

Nita bowed her head for a moment, then looked up steadily.

"Thank you," she said in a low voice; "but you needn't be. There's some trouble that sears the heart, and mine was of that sort. I don't suffer now; and I'm too busy to—to have time to brood and think. I'm playing nearly every night—sometimes twice a night when I'm in London—and that occupies my mind. It's only sometimes that I miss having someone to work for and to bully me."

The sadness with which this was said brought the tears to Stella's eyes. Nita rose and lit a candle.

"I think you'd better go to bed," she said. "I'll help you. Lean heavier. Why, I could carry you in my arms. I'm strong; it's the dancing."

She not only assisted Stella to the bedroom which she had engaged for her, but quietly insisted upon helping her to undress. Then she stood and looked at Stella with a wistfulness faintly visible in the dark eyes.

"You kissed me just now," she said in a low voice. "You—you had no cause to be ashamed of it."

After a moment or two, Stella understood; and, with a cry of pity and comprehension, put her arms around Nita and kissed her again.

It was some time before she fell asleep, for her strange surroundings and Nita's pitiful story kept her awake. It seemed to her impossible that any man could be so heartless and cruel as this woman's husband.

She thought of Rath; so noble, so unselfish, and the bitterness of her love and her separation from him swept over her like a wave, and drove even her regret and self-reproach for Lord Lisle's grief from her mind. She dreamt of Rath through all her sleeping hours.

When she limped into the sitting-room the next morning, Nita, who was making the tea, greeted her quietly and with an air of repression, as if she wished to ignore the conversation of the preceding night.

"You ought not to have got up," she said. "I was going to bring you some breakfast. How is the foot?"

"Better—much better," replied Stella.

Nita shook her head.

"You can't get rid of a sprain like that so easily," she said, with the tone of experience. "You just lie upon the sofa—oh, but you must! You'll find you'll have to. If you don't rest now, you'll be in for a long bout. I know that kind of sprain."

"I'm afraid I'm intruding," said Stella.

Nita smiled.

"You wouldn't say so if you knew how glad I am to have you," she retorted; "indeed, if I wasn't so honest, I'd let you potter about so that I could have you with me longer."

Stella looked at her gratefully; then she coloured.

"Of course, you will let me pay—I mean, I have money."

Nita shrugged her shoulders.

"Oh, you shall pay—if you can really afford it," she said.

Stella, still blushing, took out her purse and showed her the gold.

"I am quite rich, you see," she said, gaily.

Nita laughed.

"So you are," she said. "I can remember when I should have considered as much as you've got there a small fortune. Now I earn as much in a week, I suppose," she added, checking a sigh. "So that if you run short, you must go shares with me. Why, what a child you are! I wish I could.

blush like that! But rouge isn't a bad substitute, if you know how to put it on."

"Is there anything I can do to help you?" Stella asked, as Nita got out her costumes after breakfast and began to overhaul them. "Perhaps I could help you mend some of those things?"

Nita shook her head.

"No, thanks," she said. "There's not much to do; but I like to look them over in case anything has gone wrong. We dress so quickly that sometimes something gives unawares. But you can hear me say the words of a couple of new songs I'm going to try, if you like."

Stella gravely assented, and Nita tossed over the sheet music and began to repeat the words. They seemed absurdly silly to Stella, and Nita's deep, grave voice as she repeated the lines made them sound all the more vapid. But presently, having committed them to memory, she went to the piano and began to sing, and lo! the foolish words were no longer foolish, but full of meaning and point—which means that Nita was an artist and knew how to phrase.

"No wonder you are famous!" said Stella, admiringly. "Who would have thought that such silly words could be made to sound so funny? No one could help laughing."

"No; they laugh enough," said Nita, indifferently. "Listen to this."

She sang another; then, at the conclusion, rose and danced. She was a tall and graceful woman, and she danced naturally and easily, and with an abandon which had all the fascination and none of the suggestiveness of the ordinary skirt-dancer.

Stella clapped her hands, unconsciously giving the most flattering expression to her admiration.

"Oh, I wish I could see you to-night!" she said.

Nita smiled.

"You can't to-night; but some night you may," she said. "We'll see. Now I've got to go to rehearsal. There are some books by your elbow, and here is the bell. If I don't come back—and I may be kept—I'll tell the girl to bring you up some meals. And mind! you are not to hop about while I'm gone."

She did not come back during the day, and Stella spent the time trying to read; but the book lay face downwards nearly all the time, and her mind was harassed by her speculation as to what the Lisles were thinking of her, and whether Lord Lisle was searching for her. At every footfall on the stairs, she dreaded lest the door should open and he should appear.

The hours dragged away slowly, and as the clock struck twelve, Nita came in.

She looked pale and weary. There were faint traces of the grease paint and powder on her face; but they did not hide the dark shadows under her eyes.

"You shouldn't have sat up," she said.

Her voice sounded hoarse and strained.

Stella rose and limped to the fire, where she had kept some soup hot; but Nita gently forced her back on the sofa.

"It's good of you; but I couldn't eat it. I'm past it, as they say."

"Have you had a successful night?" asked Stella. "You look tired, poor thing!"

"I am rather tired. Oh, yes! it has been very successful. They turned money away, and we are going to stay on."

"I'm glad!" exclaimed Stella.

"So am I," said Nita, "for I should have stayed on here in any case until you could move."

"Oh, but—"

Nita smiled.

"It's foolish of me; but I've taken a fancy to you, my dear," she said, as she sank into a chair wearily and slowly took off her hat and jacket. "I sha'n't let you go until you are quite well and strong, and then—why, then it rests with you, if we part. Yes, we made a hit to-night. That new song and dance went like wild fire; manager said it was the best thing I've done, and that it would be sure to catch on in London. How lonely you must have been all day! I couldn't come back; we were rehearsing and rehearsing a stupid 'sketch' the manager was sweet on. He was delighted, the house was so full. Some of the swells of the neighbourhood had taken seats. They didn't come themselves, of course; but they sent some of their servants—the upper servants, I suppose. Yes, it was a big success."

She said all this in a weary, mechanical way, and sat staring at the fire as if she had something on her mind.

"You ought to be very proud," said Stella, admiringly.

Nita turned her head slowly.

"Yes, I suppose I ought. But something happened to upset me," she said, absently. "There was a man there I knew. I've met him in London several times; he has come behind the scenes where I have been playing, and waited for me at the stage door, you know; or, rather, you don't know," she broke off with a short laugh. "I thought I'd given him

the slip and got rid of him; but, by a strange chance, he's turned up down here, and—and—he won't be shaken off."

"Do—do you mean that—that—" faltered Stella.

Nita nodded.

"Yes, he's in love with me, and wants me to marry him."

Stella started uneasily.

"But—but you are married already!" she said.

Nita laughed.

"So I've told him a dozen times; but it hasn't any effect. He says that he'll go on to Klondike and find out whether my husband is alive or—or dead—if I'll promise to marry him, if I'm free."

Stella tried to grasp this.

"He must care for you very much," she said in a low tone.

"Yes; I'm afraid he does. And the worst of it is, he isn't one of the foolish young idiots that hang about the stage door and take the same stalls night after night, but a steady, middle-aged man. And then there's something about him, a cool, calm way, that makes it difficult to get rid of him."

"Do you know him, anything about him?" asked Stella, intensely interested in this new incident in this strange woman's life.

Nita shook her head.

"Nothing much. His name is Workley. He has been abroad. I think he is well off; indeed, he told me to-night that he had suddenly come into the way of making a large sum of money. He didn't say how. But there! my experience of matrimony is too bitter a one to let me even think of anything he said."

Stella leant forward and stroked the wealth of dark hair which had escaped from its bonds and now poured like a torrent over Nita's shoulders.

"Don't be angry," she said; "but—but, Nita, suppose, only suppose that you have been unjust to your husband. Isn't it possible, just possible, that he may be returning to you, even at this moment? You can't tell."

Nita rose, a faint flush showing through the powder and paint.

"Don't!" she said, sharply, as if Stella's words had stabbed her. "It isn't possible. He has gone forever. I sha'n't see him again. But don't be afraid—I see what is passing through your mind. There is no man living who could tempt me to barter my freedom for a wife's chains. Come, it's time you were in bed."

CHAPTER XXX.

THE day Stella spent in solitary reflection at Nita's lodgings was an eventful one for Mary Hatherley. She woke with a presentiment of coming trouble; but she tried to drive it from her, and to look forward to the visit of the Lisles and Stella, and she put on her hat and strolled down the avenue to meet them. As she reached the lodge gate, Cecilia rode through alone.

"Why, where are Lord Lisle and Miss Mordaunt?" asked Mary, with some misgiving, for Cecilia looked agitated and anxious, and her eyes were red as if she had been crying. She slipped from her saddle and kissed Mary.

"Oh, Mary, we are in such trouble! She has gone!"

"She—gone! Do you mean Miss Mordaunt?" asked Mary, in amazement.

"Yes. Cecil proposed to her last night on their way home, and she refused him. This morning her maid found that Stella had not slept in her bed; she had gone that same evening. She left a note on the table, begging us not to follow her, and—"

She could not go on.

"Oh, poor girl! Poor Lord Lisle!" said Mary.

"He is nearly distracted. He started in search of her, but could find no trace of her. He came back from Ratton and Holsford station just as I started; but no one had seen her go by one of the trains from either place. I was going to send word why we could not come to-day, but Cecil begged me to ride over. He thought you might help me, not so much to find her, but to decide what we should do."

Mary was silent for some time as they walked up to the house.

"Had she any money?" she asked.

"Yes, oh, yes—I had given her some—her salary, as we agreed to call it—a day or two ago. But she has no friends to whom she could go; and you can imagine Cecil's feelings as he pictured her alone and friendless in the world. And she is so young and inexprienced!"

"Yes; but she is full of courage and self-reliance—I saw that," said Mary. "What does Lord Lisle think he should do?"

"*Well, Cecil is almost convinced that it is his duty not to follow her.*"

"I agree with him," said Mary, quietly. "Let us put ourselves in her place—could either of us have acted differently? Yes; she was quite right to go, and Lord Lisle is right in deciding not to follow her. Depend upon it, you will hear from her presently. She is too sweet-natured to leave you in suspense and anxiety."

"Oh, if only she could have trusted us!" said Cecilia. "Cecil would never have spoken another word of love to her until—"

"Ah, yes! that is what she felt—'until' he hoped that she would yield. Don't you see that she would have felt wretchedly ungrateful, that sooner or later she would have consented to marry him against her will?"

"How clearly you see it all, Molly!" said Cecilia, with tearful admiration. "Where did you get such knowledge of the human heart, dear?"

"From studying my own," said Mary, with a rather sad smile. "After all, we women always act alike. Yes, I should have fled, and so would you, dear! But I am so sorry! Tell Lord Lisle that I think all the more highly of her for going as she did."

"I must try and think so, too; but, Molly, if you saw him—! He tries to bear up, but I can see how badly he is hurt; and I—well, I shall miss her terribly! Do you think she has gone to London?"

"Yes; where else could she go?"

"She wanted to go back to the island—the place where she had lived. She implored us to take her back there; but we didn't know where it was. If only we could learn that she was safe and sound!"

"Miss Mordaunt seemed quite capable of taking care of herself," said Mary, thoughtfully—"I mean, that she seemed spirited and courageous; quite different to most of us. You mustn't worry yourself, Cecilia. As for poor Lord Lisle, he will not be able to help it. How sad life is! How full of disappointments and shattered hopes!"

"Isn't it? Cecil will be glad that you agree with him that we should not try and follow her. And now I am going straight back, dear. I don't like leaving him for even a few hours."

But Mary would not let her go until she had rested. As they went towards the house, Lord Hatherley came out to meet them, and Mary saw Cecilia start.

"Yes, isn't he changed?" she said in a low voice, and with a suppressed sigh. Cecilia could scarcely conceal her concern

at the alteration in her old friend, though, at sight of her, he tried to assume something of his old brightness.

Cecilia drank a glass of milk, then remounted, and rode off. As she reached the road, she met Ralph the earl. He looked up at her with a bold stare, after the manner of his kind, and Cecilia, as she turned her head away, wondered who he could be.

Ralph walked up to the Manor and overtook Mary as she was returning to the house. She had been pondering over Stella's flight, as his footstep and voice sounded behind her.

"Good-morning, Lady Mary! Is Lord Hatherley in?" he said, with the peculiar mixture of boldness and nervousness which marked his manner when he addressed her.

"Yes," she replied. "Father is in the library."

"I'll go to him, then," said Ralph. "There's a small matter of business—"

Mary turned to him quickly.

"My father is not well, Lord Ratton," she said; "and I think, I am sure, that he is not well enough to talk business. Is it anything of great importance?"

He hesitated, and Mary, with the woman's instinct of protecting those they love, went on, hurriedly:

"Lord Ratton, what is this business which causes my father so much anxiety? Until recently he was free from care, and—and quite happy. It is only of late that he has been harassed and anxious. Oh, I wish I knew what it was that troubled him, then I would help him!" she added, with painful earnestness.

"Do you mean that?" he asked.

She regarded him intently, with brows knitted.

"Can you ask? Am I not his daughter? My father's happiness is dearer to me than life itself, Lord Ratton. I would do anything to remove this burden which presses on him so heavily."

He was silent a moment, his face flushing, his teeth catching in his under-lip.

"You could remove it easily enough; could put the whole thing straight, if you liked," he said. "I may as well admit that there is a tangle—a hitch!"

"What is it I can do? Tell me!" said Mary, with feverish eagerness.

"I've half a mind to tell you. Let us go and sit down in the arbour," he said.

They went to a garden-house on the lawn, and Mary sat down and waited, her eyes fixed upon him impatiently. He

sat, scratching the gravel with the end of his stick, his eyes downcast, his under-lip still caught in his teeth.

"Please don't keep me in suspense, Lord Ratton!" said Mary, imperiously. "I will ask you to tell me everything. I know, I can see, that there is something wrong, that something is harassing my father and making him ill."

He glanced at her from under his half-closed lids.

"Yes, he's worried!" he said. "It's on your account, Lady Mary."

"On mine?" said Mary, with amazement.

Ralph nodded.

"Yes. He's been trying to make provision for you—the property, as you know, goes away from you if he dies—he has been speculating so that you should have a small fortune if anything happened to him; and—well, he's made a mess of it. That's the worst of speculation. If it doesn't turn out right it's a serious business. And your father has been putting all his eggs in one basket. The basket's fallen and the eggs are broken, and there's a regular hash."

Mary grew pale.

"Please explain," she said. "I—I don't understand!"

"You must give me your promise, your sacred promise not to tell him, if I do," he said.

She inclined her head.

"I promise!" she said

"Well, then, he's been buying shares in a certain mining company, and there's a slump in them; in fact, the thing is a kind of fraud, and your father has to meet claims which will swamp him and force him to sell his life's interest in the estate—"

"Oh, wait—wait! One moment!" breathed Mary, overwhelmed and confused. "Do—do you mean that my father is ruined?"

"Well, that's it," he said. "He'd have to let the place and go and live on the Continent—peace, retrenchment, reform, you know."

"Leave Hatherley!" she panted. "Oh, it would kill him!"

"I shouldn't be surprised if it did," he said, promptly, "for he seems bound up in the place. But it's not himself he's worrying about so much as about you. You see, Lady Mary, he's very fond of you, and the thought that he has brought you to ruin—"

She drew a long breath.

"*I know—I know!* It is not of himself he would think,

but me! Ruined! Oh, poor father! But"—she turned on him so suddenly that Ralph started guiltily—"you said I could help him."

"Yes; it rests with you," he said, as calmly as he could, for his heart was throbbing with anticipation of the triumph which he saw so near at hand. "If you like to say a word, *one* word, you can lift this trouble off him as easily as I lift this stick."

"How—how?" demanded Mary, swiftly.

"By marrying me," said Ralph.

Mary started and her face went white.

"Look here, Lady Mary," he went on, edging a little nearer to her and speaking in a thick voice; for the nearness, the beauty, of the prize he was striving for sent the blood to his head, "I asked you once before this to marry me, and—and you declined. I said I'd wait; and I *have* waited. I'm the sort of man who knows what he wants and means to have it; and I want you. I've loved you ever since—"

He saw her shudder, and his lip took the nasty twist which Mr. Workley had noticed.

"It's for you to decide. Your father's happiness is in your hands. Yes; that's just it. If you marry me, I'll help him out of this hole. You'll know that you are provided for."

"Do not speak of me—my future; it is of himself," she panted.

"Just so! Well, if you'll marry me, I'll advance the money that is necessary to clear him; and, instead of having to turn out of Hatherley, he can end his days here in peace and comfort."

"In peace and comfort!" she repeated, mechanically; she was thinking at that moment only of her father.

"That's it!" said Ralph, emphatically. "I wouldn't insure his life at any premium if he had to turn out of here."

"No; it would kill him!" she murmured.

"I daresay; I shouldn't be surprised. So now you understand! I hope I haven't spoken too plainly; and—anyway, I have got your solemn promise that you will not tell him."

"Yes; you have my promise," she said, dully.

"And what do you say?" he asked. "Come, Lady Mary, you must admit that I'm not a bad match; you know that I am fond of you. I love you—!"

She rose and stood trembling, grasping the end of the seat.

"Let me think—give me time!" she panted. She went slowly, falteringly, out of the summer-house, and stood with her hands clasped, her head bowed. At that moment the

thought of her promise to Edward Bryan. How lightly, with what smiling serenity, it had been uttered! She had said that she would not marry Lord Ratton "if she could help it." If she could help it! But could she help it? Her father's happiness, his salvation from ruin, his very life, seemed to hang upon her decision. And in such a case Mary was not one to hesitate long. Yet she did hesitate for a moment; for the sacrifice demanded of her was not only of herself, but of the man she loved. What would Edward say, what anguish he must endure, when he came back and found her the wife of Ralph the earl!

She hesitated, but it was only for a moment or two. For her father's life no sacrifice, even that of Edward's happiness, could count as too great. She went back to Ralph, who sat leaning on his stick and eyeing her with covert impatience, and he was surprised by her calmness, the determination in her beautiful eyes.

"I—I have considered, Lord Ratton," she said in a monotonous voice—a voice that seemed absolutely expressionless. "And—and I consent!"

He sprang to his feet, and tried to take her hand. She drew it back suddenly, then resigned it to his feverish grasp.

"You—you consent—you'll marry me?" he said, his face red in patches, his eyes flashing.

"I will marry you. Wait! Let me understand," she said, as he made a movement as if he were going to embrace her. "It—it is a bargain between us, Lord Ratton? You—you will help my father—you will save him from—from ruin? It will not be necessary for him to leave Hatherley?"

"No, no!" he said, eagerly. "I swear I'll act on the straight by you! I'll pay everything. I'll make a handsome settlement. Dash it all! you'll be the Countess of Ratton, you know! It's not a bad match—you might have done worse!" he exclaimed, nettled by the resignation, the coldness in her eyes.

"Forgive me," she said, almost inaudibly. "I know—I am grateful for what you are doing for us—for my father, for me; but—but—"

Her voice failed her, and she turned her burning, tearless eyes away from his eager gaze.

"But it's just for his sake; just to save him," he said, bitterly.

Then he checked back the oath that rose to his lips, and forced a smile.

"*I know. But* look here, Lady Mary; I'm not a bad sort

when—when I'm not thwarted and get my own way; and I—I—dash it! I love you!"

He was about to catch her to him, when Lord Hatherley's step, slow and heavy, was heard on the path outside.

Ralph, with a muttered curse at the interruption, let his arms fall to his side, and catching Mary's arm, led her to meet her father.

"Here is a young couple that want your blessing, Lord Hatherley," he said, in the manner of the fifth-rate actor in a fifth-rate melodrama. "Lady Mary's promised to be my wife."

Lord Hatherley stopped short and looked from one to the other, the colour coming and going in his lined face.

"Mary, is—is it so?" he faltered.

She drew her hand from Ralph's hot grasp, and putting her arm round her father's neck, kissed him.

"Yes, father," she whispered, fighting, not with her tears, but the feeling of suffocation and faintness which threatened to overcome her.

He drew her to him, and, with tears in his eyes, murmured:

"God bless you, Molly! God bless you! I—I am very glad."

"Then I am glad also, father," she murmured almost inaudibly.

Ralph remained to lunch. Mary sat at the head of the table, trying to smile, trying to look at peace and contented; but every now and then, as she glanced at her future husband as he lolled back in his chair and drank glass after glass of wine with a self-satisfied air, every time she met his bold, triumphant eyes fixed upon her, her heart quailed with an anguish indescribable. For she thought of the man she loved, the man who was absent, fighting fortune in the now vain hope of winning her.

But women instinctively learn to suffer in silence, to mask the pain that racks them, to smile while their hearts are breaking; and her father never guessed at the storm of emotion which lay behind her outward calm. Ralph remained the day, and came the next morning.

"I have to drive into Ratton, father," she said, after luncheon; "is there anything I can get for you?"

"No, Molly, dear, nothing. There is nothing I want—now!" he replied, with a significant emphasis on the *now*.

Ralph rose and lit one of his big black cigars.

"I'll go with you—Mary!" he said.

She coloured at his use of her Christian name, at his offer

of accompanying her, and with a slight inclination of her head left the room.

She had ordered the victoria, and Ralph seated himself beside her with an air of proprietorship which hurt her almost as much as if he had struck her.

"You don't mind my smoking—open carriage, you know?" he asked.

"Oh, no," she said.

And she did not. What did it matter whether he smoked or not?

"Jolly, isn't it?" he said, with a fatuous laugh. He had drunk the best part of a bottle of Burgundy at lunch. "I'm deuced glad we've settled matters. The guv'nor was precious glad, wasn't he? Poor old chap; our engagement's taken a big load off his shoulders! Why, where are you going; right into the slums, isn't it?"

"I have to leave some wine and things for a sick woman in one of these streets," said Mary in a dull, heavy voice.

"Oh, 'Lady Bountiful,' eh? I know it. I've given away any amount of money since I came into the title; but I shall shut down now. A married man isn't like a bachelor; he's got to be careful. Provide for the rising generation, you know!"

Mary felt faint almost to sickness, and the colour came and went.

"Not that I'm obliged to," he continued. "There's any amount of money, any amount. Oh, we'll enjoy ourselves Lady—I mean Mary, my dear!"

As they drove down one of the outlying streets of the town, the street in which Nita had played the Good Samaritan to Stella, it chanced that Nita went to the window of the sitting-room and looked out.

Stella, lost in thought, was lying on the sofa, but a sudden cry from Nita roused her.

It was a strange cry, an exclamation of amazement emerging into one of rage and indignation.

Stella looked round and saw Nita leaning against the corner of the window. She was clutching the cheap muslin curtain and, apparently, nearly fainting.

Stella rose and limped to her side.

"What is it, Nita; are you ill?" she asked, with alarm.

Nita tore at her collar as if she were choking, and struggled for breath.

"*It's him—him*—him!" she panted, in a suffocating voice.

"*Him! Who?*" asked Stella, terribly alarmed.

"He's just gone by, in a carriage, with—with a lady beside him!" cried Nita, hoarsely.

"He? Who?"

"My—my husband!" gasped Nita.

Stella took the agitated woman's arm and drew her from the window.

"What do you say?" she said. "Your—your husband?"

Nita sank into a chair and covered her face with her hands, and remained motionless for a moment; then she raised her head and looked, not at Stella, but beyond her.

"It was only my fancy!" she said, as if to herself. "I've—I've been mistaken so many times. It was like him; but—but—how could it be? In a carriage and alone with a lady; No; it was only my fancy!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

ALL Market Ratton saw Ralph the earl lounging beside Lady Mary in the open carriage, and all Market Ratton jumped to the conclusion that they were engaged. The local paper, anxious to get ahead of its county rivals, boldly announced the engagement in its issue of the next morning, and spread itself on "the event of the happiest union" for the district and the county generally. In its opinion, and, indeed, most of its readers, no more fitting union could be imagined. Ralph was one of the most popular, if not the most popular, nobleman in the neighbourhood, and it was eminently suitable that he should wed the daughter of another local peer who was respected as much as he was liked.

Ralph read the paragraph and leaderette with a glow of pride and satisfaction unalloyed with a single qualm. When once a man has actually set forth on the path of a particular crime, he is seldom visited by qualms of conscience or fear. It is while he is hesitating, listening half-heartedly to the voice of the tempter, or when he is in danger of detection that he shrinks and shivers; but once the border line is passed, he is usually callous or reckless; and Ralph had so ardently desired the death or complete disappearance of Nita that he had almost grown to regard her as dead, or, at any rate, not likely to cross his path. Besides, it is just possible that he had a kind of idea that a man of his rank, position, and wealth could commit almost any crime, short of murder, with impunity, or could, at any rate, get off "by paying."

He rode over to Hatherley after breakfast, with the paper in his pocket.

"The news has soon leaked out," he said to Lord Hatherley. "I see you are reading the announcement," nodding at the paper open beside Lord Hatherley's plate.

Lord Hatherley nodded a gesture of assent. The fulsome leaderette, written in the latest newspaperese, jarred upon him.

"Yes," he said. "They might have waited for an authorisation; but nothing is sacred to a journalist. Mary has not seen this, and I will keep it from her."

"There's nothing to be ashamed of," said Ralph, with a flush of resentment.

"No, most certainly not; but—well, you see, she is not used to seeing her name in the paper, and would naturally shrink from such publicity."

"I expect she'll have to get used to it when she's married," said Ralph, with complacent vanity. "They're fond of sticking in paragraphs about me; and I can't have a run with the hounds, or have a few fellows to lunch or dinner, without its getting into the gazette. And speaking of marriage," he went on, with an air of bravado, "I should think the sooner it came off the better. We both know our own minds, and—and I don't see the use of waiting."

Lord Hatherley looked up nervously.

"It rests with Mary," he said in a low voice, and with the feeling of uneasiness and apprehension which had lately assailed him at the prospect of his child's marriage with this man whom he had only a short time ago so ardently desired for a son-in-law.

"I'll go and ask her. Where is she?" asked Ralph, rather awkwardly; for, though he was no longer afraid of Lord Hatherley, he was conscious of a certain embarrassment under the calm, sad eyes of Mary.

"She is in the garden; she has a headache this morning," said Lord Hatherley, with a sigh. "She ate no breakfast."

"Wants a change," put in Ralph. "I'll take her on the Continent, down south, or to Egypt for the honey-moon. She'll soon pull through there. I'll go and find her. Those shares are still dropping down, I see."

Lord Hatherley winced and hung his head, and Ralph, with a cruel smile of triumph, went out to the garden.

Mary had seen him ride up the drive, and, obeying an uncontrollable impulse to avoid him, had slipped into the summer-house—the summer-house in which she had sat with Edward Bryan. She shuddered as the recollection of that

morning swept over her, and she came out and met Ralph as he sauntered, with the air of a conqueror, down the path.

He meant to put his arm round her and kiss her, but Mary stood off from him and extended her hand with that indefinable air with which a woman keeps a man at arm's-length.

"Sorry you've got a headache," he said, biting his lip at what he mentally called her "cursed coldness." "I've just been telling your father that you want a change. What do you say to our marrying at once and going south?"

The blood left Mary's face, and left it cold as well as white.

"So—soon!" she faltered.

"Why not?" he asked, rather sullenly. "What's the use of waiting? I spoke to your father, and he's quite willing; in fact, between you and me, our marriage would lift a heavy load from his mind."

She leant her hand on the rail near which they stood, to steady herself, and looked up at him with clear, cold eyes, in which shone the resignation of the martyr who bears her pain uncomplainingly.

"It shall be as you and he wish," she said in a low, still voice.

The blood rushed to his face and his eyes glowed.

"You are a dear, good girl!" he said. "We'll say this day month, then?"

Mary inclined her head, and as she did so, he took a step nearer and put his arm round her.

"Let's ratify that!" he said, rather hoarsely.

She raised her head, and stood passive and holding her breath as he kissed her.

"Why, you are trembling like a leaf!" he said, half angrily, nettled by the coldness of her surrender. "Do most girls take a kiss so seriously from their future husbands?"

She blushed from neck to face.

"Perhaps I am not like most girls," she said, desperately.

"No, you're not. You're miles better than the best!" he rejoined, spurred by the exquisite beauty of the blushing face and lovely eyes. "By George! I'm a lucky man to have won you; and so they'll all say. I'm the happiest man in England, Mary!"

"Are you sure?" she said, with a drawing together of her brows. It seemed impossible to her that a man should be rendered happy by such a conquest. He looked at her with a shade of suspicion in his eyes.

"Am I sure? How do you mean?" he asked.

"'Count no man happy until he is dead,' you know," she answered.

He bit at his lip, and looked at her from under his lowered lids.

"That's not a very cheerful way of regarding things," he said. "You're out of spirits and want a tonic, a change, I'm sure of it. I'll go and tell old Bulpit to draw up the marriage settlements, and we'll give notice to the parson, and order the cake. And you can amuse yourself by ordering your *trousseau* and chiffons."

Mary winced at his indelicate way of alluding to the marriage preparations, those preparations which are regarded by the young girl as a matter of such solemn, almost sacred importance; but he was too self-satisfied that morning to notice the pain he had given, and he rode off with his head high and his hat a little on one side. On his way to Market Ratton he met several friends, and they one and all congratulated him heartily.

"The fairy godmother seems to have been all there at your birth, Ratton," said Lord Parodel, with a shrug of his shoulders. He was just coming from Mr. Bulpit, of whom he had been trying to raise a fresh loan on his already heavily encumbered estates. "Not content with giving you Ratton and a million of money, she presents you with the loveliest and most charming girl in the county. Yes, by George, you are a lucky beggar!"

Ralph laughed triumphantly, and entered Mr. Bulpit's office with a face flushed with success. As he strode in and walked straight to Mr. Bulpit's private room, and nodded to the old clerk, he could not help remembering the morning he had entered that same office, dust and travel-stained, parched with thirst, and in a flutter of anxiety and suspense. What a change in his circumstances!

Mr. Bulpit received him with the mixture of respect and the calm, almost cynical, regard of the keen eyes which always annoyed Ralph and made him vaguely uneasy.

"I suppose you've heard the news, Bulpit?"

"Yes, my lord, and I offer you my congratulations," said the old lawyer with, as Ralph fancied, an emphasis on the "you." "I have known Lady Mary since she was a child, and—"

He paused and took snuff energetically.

"*Thanks; very kind!*" drawled Ralph. "I want you to *draw up the marriage* settlement. What ought I to settle on *my wife, now?*"

"Five thousand a year," replied Mr. Bulpit, quietly.

He had, since reading the announcement in the paper, been considering the matter.

Ralph looked rather blank.

"Oh!" he said, grimly.

Mr. Bulpit eyed him gravely and critically.

"You would like to make it more?" he said, suavely. "Very natural, considering your income, my lord."

"Oh, no!" rejoined Ralph, hastily. "That will do." Now that he had secured Mary he was not anxious to pay too long a price for his possession. "Get the thing prepared as quickly as possible; we are going to be married in a month."

Mr. Bulpit frowned as he inclined his head.

"So soon?" he said.

Ralph coloured.

"Why not? Why the devil should we wait?" he retorted.

"I know of no reason, my lord," replied Mr. Bulpit. "There will be no difficulty in arranging the settlement. We have the proceeds of the sale of the New Golcondas deposited in the bank and can realise on some of the consols. You sold those shares just in time, my lord."

Ralph nodded and laughed shortly as he thought of the clever stroke of business by which he had made a large sum of money and secured Mary.

"Yes, the other poor beggars who held on must have been let in."

Mr. Bulpit assented.

"Lord Hatherley was very desirous of dabbling in them, I believe; but I dissuaded him. Oh, by the way, my lord, a man named Workley has been here this morning. He applied for the Cross Tree Farm, which becomes vacant at Lady Day. He offered considerably less rent than the last tenant, but assured me that you would accept it."

Ralph, in the flush of his success, had almost forgotten Workley. He coloured, and flicked his leg with his riding-whip.

"Oh, did he?" he said, with assumed carelessness. "I'll think it over."

"You know him—know that he is a responsible man?" said Mr. Bulpit. "I think that he has only been in the neighbourhood a short time."

"Oh, yes, he's all right," said Ralph, casually. "I'll think it over."

He left the office with much less of a swagger than he had entered it, and as he rode home the nasty twist of his lip was

very noticeable. His face grew blacker as the butler met him in the hall and informed him that "a person by the name of Workley" wished to see him.

"I told him that your lordship's return was uncertain; but he insisted upon waiting; he is in the library, my lord."

Ralph strode quickly into the room and found Mr. Workley seated in Ralph's particular chair, with his legs over one arm, and one of Ralph's big and black cigars between his lips.

Ralph, pale with fury, stared at him haughtily; but Mr. Workley, though he slung his legs into an ordinary position, did not rise.

"Good-morning, my lord," he said, pleasantly, his small, bird-like eyes meeting Ralph's furious ones coolly.

"You make yourself at home, Mr. Workley!" said Ralph, sarcastically, and with an angry glance at the cigar-box on the table.

"Not knowing how long I should have to wait, I took the liberty of helping myself to a cigar," said Workley, "and a very fine cigar it is; full flavored but soft in the mouth. It's a good brand, wherever you got it, my lord."

"I'm delighted to hear that my tobacco meets with your approval," said Ralph, hardly able to contain himself. "And now, perhaps, you'll be good enough to explain your business."

"Certainly, my lord. I've come up to congratulate you on your engagement—"

"Thanks! But—"

"And on a little matter of business of my own. I want the Cross Tree Farm, my lord."

"Oh, is that all?" said Ralph. "You are sure you don't want the Hall?"

This bit of furious sarcasm seemed to pass over Mr. Workley as water passes off a duck's back.

"No, no," he responded, with a laugh. "I'm not so greedy, my lord. I shouldn't know what to do with it, if I had it; no, that little farm will content a humble individual like me."

"What do you want with it?" asked Ralph. "Mr. Bulpit tells me you have already been to him, and that you offered him a lower rent."

"Yes; that was a mistake," said Mr. Workley, coolly. "I needn't have done that, for I know you are too good a sort to insist upon an old pal of your father's paying any rent at all."

Ralph eyed him savagely.

"Look here, Mr. Workley," he said in a thick voice, "this is the second time you've attempted to blackmail me. The first time I gave you something from sheer good nature; but now—why the devil should I let you one of the farms—and rent free, too?" he broke off.

Mr. Workley selected a fresh cigar, and while he lit it he fixed his small, twinkling eyes upon Ralph's crimson face.

"Sure you don't know?" he demanded.

Ralph swore—and swore vilely.

"No, I don't; except that I had the misfortune to meet you when I was—in—in a different position, before I had come into my property, and I don't want you to gas about it all over the town."

"Is that the only reason? Well, I believe you. And that being so, take my advice: don't ask. Don't you ask, my lord. For, if you knew, you'd wonder why I don't demand the Hall—and that rent free, too."

Ralph's face went white, and he frowned as if he were trying to decide whether to insist or not upon learning the nature of the man's knowledge.

"Don't ask, my lord," repeated Mr. Workley, gravely, almost solemnly. "You let me the farm for ninety-nine years at a pepper-corn rent, and advance enough for me to stock it as one of your lordship's farms should be stocked, and you won't hear any more from me. The fact is, I'm thinking of being married, like yourself, and want to settle down. I might ask you for a big lump sum; but I'm not extortionate. You won't miss the rent of a single farm and a little wedding-present."

Ralph bit his lip.

"How am I to know that you won't blackmail me again?" he asked.

Mr. Workley laughed.

"Well, you've got my word. But, to tell you the truth, I don't like the business; and when I'm married, I shall like it less. You'll have my respectability as security against any more applications like this. 'Pon my word, you're making a good bargain. Like enough, if you gave me a lump sum to, say, leave the country, I should spend it or lose it, and be back for more; but I shall do very well at the Cross Tree Farm, you'll see."

Ralph paced up and down.

"Does your—your secret, your information, concern me or my father?" he asked in a low voice.

Mr. Workley smiled.

"No, no; let it alone!" he said. "Give me what I ask, and I'll keep my mouth shut and pocket my cards; refuse me, and I tell what I know—not to you, but to Mr. Bulpit—I'll throw the cards down for all the world to see."

"I've a good mind to defy you, to ride to the police-station and charge you with attempting to blackmail me!" said Ralph, hotly.

Mr. Workley smiled.

"You've a better mind to take a cigar and order something for us to drink," he said, quietly; and he stretched out his hand and rang the bell. "I'll take a whiskey and soda."

The servant came in, and Ralph half mechanically gave the order.

"And I may have the farm? Thank you, my lord," said Workley, respectfully, as the footman placed the things on the table. "I won't detain your lordship any longer, and I am exceedingly obliged." He drank his whiskey and soda at a draught, took up his soft hat, and, with a bow as respectful as his tone, wished Lord Ratton good-morning and went out.

Ralph flung himself into a chair and pondered.

What was it the fellow knew? Some disreputable incident in the life of Ralph's father? That must be it, for Workley had repeatedly hinted, in a significant way, of his knowledge of the father. For a moment, Ralph thought of Nita, and the sweat broke out upon him; but he put the suggestion from him. No one of his early companions, fellow-actors, and loafers, knew of his marriage, or where he lived. It was most improbable that this man, whom Ralph had only met casually, should be aware of his marriage. No, it was something connected with his father! What could it be?

He rose with a smothered oath. At any rate, he could not afford to defy the man at this moment. When the marriage had taken place, and Lady Mary was his, then he might do so. After all, Workley might be satisfied with the farm; and his silence would be cheaply purchased at such a price. With a dark face and heavy brow, he wrote a short note to Mr. Bulpit telling him to prepare a lease of Cross Tree Farm at a pepper-corn rent. "I find that Mr. Workley was an old friend of my father's, and rendered him a great service; and I am anxious to make it up to him, for my father's sake," he added.

Then he went to the table and poured out some whiskey and drank it neat. As he sat the glass down, he caught sight of the one from which Workley had drunk, and he snatched it up and flung it into the fire-place.

"Curse him!" he muttered. "Let him wait until I am married!"

But though he tried to console himself with this threat of future defiance, the reflection that Workley had got what he had demanded rendered Ralph the earl anything but complacent.

He dined that night at Hatherley. Mary had still a bad headache, and, pleading it as an excuse, she left him and her father as soon as the dessert was set. Ralph had tried to shake off the effects of his interview with Workley, but had not succeeded in doing so until after Mary had left the room, and the butler had brought in the port.

"I mustn't touch it, Ralph," said poor Lord Hatherley, with a sigh, as he glanced at his tumbler of mineral water beside him.

"Then I must drink Mary's health for both of us," said Ralph, and he did so by drinking two glasses in quick succession. Then he began to talk rapidly, as was his way when the wine was in, and when he had finished the port he drew the sherry decanter towards him half mechanically. As he poured himself out a glass—using one of the large burgundy glasses—Lord Hatherley regarded him with vague disquietude. Ralph had always been "careful" when in the presence of Mary and her father, but this evening he seemed to have lost his usual caution, and when he rose to get a light for his cigar he staggered slightly.

"Room's deuced hot!" he said, with a suspicion of a hiccough. "Yes, Mary and I'll get along all right, you'll see! She's a bit wilful and fond of having her own way—only natural—only child, you know!" He laughed knowingly and nodded with tipsy gravity at the unhappy old man. "But she'll settle down into her right place. They all of them do. I know women—I flatter myself there's no one knows the fair sex better than I do. Met 'em on the boards and off— That sherry decanter's empty."

"I will ring for some more if you wish it," said Lord Hatherley. "There's some apollinaris here—"

"Poor stuff, that," responded Ralph; "but I'll have some with a dash of brandy." He mixed it rather strongly, and drank it off. "What was I saying? Oh, about Mary! She'll settle down and find her level—"

Lord Hatherley rose as if he could endure no more.

"Will you come into the smoking-room?" he said, huskily.

Ralph shook his head.

"Better go home, I think," he said, with preternatural

gravity. "That—that port is rather heavy; isn't so old as it pretends to be, I dessay. I feel sleepy, and will toddle off to bed."

Lord Hatherley accompanied him to the hall and helped him on with his coat, and Ralph, with a meaningless laugh and a thick "Good-night!" went out.

Lord Hatherley saw him stop to light his cigar; but as Ralph appeared to be able to do so, and Lord Hatherley disliked the idea of "watching" a departing guest, he closed the door and went to the library with a heart heavy with foreboding.

Ralph made his way up the avenue fairly steadily. The cold air made him feel giddy and confused, but it helped to sober him, and with an oath at his lack of prudence and the quality of the port, he pulled himself together as he passed the lodge gate.

But he had no sooner got into the road, and was making his way towards his own gate, when he saw something that sent the blood from his heart, and caused him to stop short as if he had been shot. Across his own park fence, standing out clearly in the moonlight, in huge, blood-red letters, the one word, "Nita!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

He stood and stared, and the perspiration broke out from every pore.

"Good God! I must be drunk!" he muttered—"mad drunk! Nita—Nita! It's—it's fancy!"

He shuddered and shook himself, then went up to the word and touched it.

It was a poster of the most glaring kind, and had only recently been posted up, for it was still damp to his touch. By a mere chance he had failed, in his ride through the town, to notice the ordinary bills, and this one glaring at him suddenly from his own park fence almost stunned him.

He looked round covertly, then leant against the fence, and taking off his hat, wiped the sweat from his face. Nita! It was of no use trying to persuade himself that there were probably half a score of Nitas. He knew that this was the announcement of his deserted wife's presence in the town. What should he do? There was only one possible answer to the question. He must leave Ratton for a time, until she had gone. But Lady Marv? He must think it out—he must

get home, away from those blood-red letters which seemed to denounce and mock and jeer at him.

He passed through the gates almost stealthily, and keeping in the shadow of the great elms, made his way up the avenue with quick, uncertain steps. Suddenly he stopped short with a cry of alarm, for something had stepped out from amongst the trees and stood confronting him. It was a woman, tall, commanding, with a white face from which the dark eyes blazed scornfully. It looked so weird, so motionless in the moonlight, that Ralph was half persuaded that it was a vision called up by his overwrought nerves, but he could not prevent the cry, "Nita!" rising from his hot, parched lips.

"Yes, it's me," she said; and at the sound of his wife's voice Ralph staggered back and leant against one of the elms, his arms hanging at his sides, his eyes distended with terror.

"Nita!" he gasped at last, as she stood looking at him with scorn and suppressed rage. "Nita!" His cunning came to his aid even at that supreme moment. "I—I thought you—you were dead!"

"You lie, Ralph!" she retorted, with a short gasp, as if she were struggling for calm. "You lie, and you know that I know it!"

"I swear—!" he began, eagerly; but she stopped him with a gesture.

"Spare yourself the trouble of further falsehoods," she said; "spare yourself the trouble of making excuses. You knew I was alive; you deserted me like a hound, a cur; you have been hiding from me—you left me to die or live, to struggle on or starve; you did not care which. No; you hoped that it would be the last—"

"Nita, I never—you wrong me!" he broke in, hurriedly, gesticulating with his hands and trying, but vainly, to meet the fire of her eyes. "I heard you were abroad and—died. I searched for you."

"Where? At the old lodgings, the place you left me? You lie again! You could not have gone there, enquired there, without my knowing it. You left me, intending to desert me, never to come back, and but for this chance, this accident, of seeing you, you would have gone on deserting me. Ralph, I know you now for the mean and cowardly cur you are. No matter what you swear, I should not believe you; you could not deceive me. Not again! I believed in you once, I blinded myself to your faults, I— Oh!" She put her hand to her throat as if she were choking. "It drives me mad to think of the past, of the way I trusted and

slaved for you—for *you!*" she laughed, with bitter self-contempt.

He looked round apprehensively.

"Hush—hush!" he muttered, hoarsely. "Someone—someone may hear you!"

"And if they do?" she retorted, fiercely—so fiercely that he could scarcely believe her to be the same Nita, the woman who had in the old times borne his selfishness, his tyranny, so patiently, so meekly. The wonder at the change in her almost overwhelmed his terror. "What if they do?" she demanded. "I am your wife—a wife may talk to her husband—in his own grounds. This *is* your house, isn't it? They tell me that you are a nobleman—the Earl of Ratton! Is it true?"

He nodded and wiped the sweat from his face.

"Yes," he admitted, sullenly, absently. How could he persuade her to keep quiet? "I'll—I'll tell you all about it. Let us walk under the trees—there's a seat just behind here."

He led the way amongst the elms, and after a moment of defiant hesitation, she followed him. He had sunk on to the seat, his head resting on his hands, his whole frame shaking, and she stood and looked down at him, her lips tightly set, her eyes gloomy with contempt and anger.

"Well," she demanded, impatiently, "I am waiting; is it true? If so, how has it happened? Have you robbed someone of his title and estate? How have you got it?"

"What do you mean?" he said, confusedly. "It's mine. I came by it rightly. My—my right name is Ratton; I'm the earl, the owner of this place. I—I—discovered who I was after—after I left you."

She saw in a moment that he was lying.

"Before you left me; the same day," she said. "I understand. It was like you—like you! Oh! I see it all! I was not fit to be a countess, the wife of a great swell; I was fit to toil and starve for Ralph Bannister, the strolling actor, but not worthy of being the wife of a nobleman—" She broke off with a laugh. "But we'll see! we'll see, my Lord Ratton! I'll have my rights. Yes, though I have to go back to you, to take you back! And that's paying pretty dear for them!"

He winced under her scorn.

"*I tell you* I thought you were dead!" he said, sullenly. "*Believe it or not* as you like; I'm not going to say it again.

I'm—I'm willing to let by-gones be by-gones, to—to—to forget the past."

She laughed.

"And I'm not. I'll never forget it. Who was that lady I saw you riding with?"

He pretended not to understand for a moment, then he said, casually:

"Only a friend—a neighbour."

"Only the poor girl you were going to marry, going to trap into a marriage that would have been no marriage. I know; they told me; all the town knows it, you cur!"

He half rose, distracted with fear and impotent rage.

"People—people will talk," he stammered. "Nothing was settled. I thought that I was free. But now you've turned up—of course—" He wiped his face again, and, unable to meet her gaze, stared at the ground. "Of course everything is altered."

"Yes," she said. "To-night everybody in your house, *our* house, shall know I am your wife; and to-morrow you shall take me to her and tell her with your own lips—"

He went white, and his under-lip twisted. He was silent for a moment or two, then he looked up at her with an expression of sullen resignation.

"All right," he said, with a shrug of the shoulders. "You mean having your revenge, I see. Well, have it; it will ruin me; but it will ruin you also."

"Let it!" she retorted, sharply. "Yes, I want my revenge, and I'll take it. All the world shall know the kind of man you are. Your friends—I suppose you have made friends with the people here—the people who don't know you? —shall learn what you were, and how you deserted the poor woman who was unlucky enough to be your wife; and I'll stand by and see them turn from you with loathing and scorn! I'm told you're popular. Popular! They'll hiss you in the streets as you go by!"

The blood surged to his head and almost blinded him.

"All right!" he said. "Yes, you can do it; you can ruin me, you can drive me out of the place and make it so hot for me that I can never come back. Perhaps I deserve it; but you'll be a fool if you punish me in that way; you'll enjoy your revenge for a week or two, but you'll have chucked away your future as well as mine."

"Put me out of the question—as you have always done," she said. "I am indifferent as to what comes of me; nothing can happen to me that I should care about."

"But why should you carry on like that?" he said, insensibly falling into the tone of the old days of poverty and squalor. "You can pay too dearly even for revenge. Listen to me, Nita. Yes, listen. You can do as you like after you've heard me; you can go up to the house and ring the bell, and say, 'I am Lord Ratton's wife!' if you like; I won't prevent you."

"You could not," she said, calmly. "It is probably what I shall do."

"Just so! And you'd only be claiming your rights. I shouldn't oppose you."

"You could not—dare not! I have my marriage lines. I have proofs."

"Yes, yes; I know," he assented, looking up and fighting with the desire to spring upon her and silence the scornful voice, quench the fire of the dark, accusing eyes. "You can do what you like; I'm helpless. D—n it, don't I say so? But look here, Nita; if you mean to come back to live with me, wouldn't it be better if we made friends and—and lived together happily?"

"Happily!"

She laughed with bitter scorn.

"Yes," he said, doggedly. "Why not? It wasn't so easy in the old time, when we had to struggle for bread; but we managed it. We—we were fond of each other, Nita; and it's different now. I am a nobleman—you're a countess—and we're rich; tremendously rich. This place, all this land, is mine. We are young, quite young, and have got a long life before us. Why shouldn't we spend it properly, enjoying the title and the money, with every luxury and no end of friends; with travelling and—shopping?"

Her lip curled.

"You know it isn't possible," she said. "I'm Nita, a music-hall *artiste*, and everybody will know it; and worse, everybody will know that I am the wife you deserted."

"But why should they?" he broke in, eagerly. "Why, where's your old sharpness gone, Nita?"

"With my youth, and my trust in God and man!" she retorted, bitterly.

"Don't you see?" he went on, untouched by the terrible arraignment of her response. "We'll go abroad, separately, of course, and I'll be supposed to meet you there for the first time and marry you. There'll be a little excitement and talk, of course; an earl and a music-hall girl, you know; but the world's used to that kind of marriage by this time, or

ought to be, seeing how common it is; and when we come back, they'll receive us; all the county people, just as if you were a lady; you'll see if they don't! And what a fine time we'll have! By George! I'm looking forward to it. I've—I've not treated you well—there! I admit it; but I'll make it up to you, by God, I will! I'll be as good a husband as they make 'em! Come, Nita, be reasonable!"

In his eagerness, he ventured to stretch out his hand and take hold of the edge of her jacket; but she jerked it out of his uncertain fingers.

But her eyes wavered, and she bent them on the ground as if half reluctantly pondering his offer.

"Come!" he pleaded, emboldened by her silence. "It's a good plan, isn't it? Dash it! it's better than rounding on me and ruining us both. Just consider, Nita; we're persons of rank, with no end of money—there's no end of it, I tell you!—and we've got years before us in which to enjoy ourselves. And, by George! what a fine countess you'll make!" he threw in, looking at the tall, graceful figure and pale, handsome face. "You'll ruffle it with the best of them. God! I can see you in evening-dress, and wearing the family diamonds, at the head of the table, surrounded by a host of swells, and driving through the town in a carriage and pair!"

She smiled with a mixture of pity and contempt for the meanness of his nature.

"Do you think I care about anything of that sort?" she said in a low voice. "You want to bribe me with money and a position which I'm not fit for. If—if"—her voice quivered for the first time and her tightly strained lips quivered—"if I'd found you poor and—and down on your luck, as you were when you left me; if you'd said one word of kindness, tenderness, I'd have come back to you—yes, and worked for you and shared my last crust with you—"

Her voice broke, and the tears welled to her eyes.

He seized the advantage offered him by her sudden weakness—the weakness which always places the woman at man's mercy, alas!

"What! don't you see that I'm longing for you to say 'yes?'" he cried, with assumed emotion. "See here, Nita; though I've come into the title and money, I'm not happy; I've not been from the first day. I've always missed something. Perhaps I didn't know it; but what I missed was you."

He rose and crept near her, but she drew back.

"Yes, you looked like it when I first saw you just now," she said.

"Well, I was startled, of course. Who wouldn't be? Anyhow, I'm glad now. Yes, I'm glad you've come back, Nita. I know now—now that we've had a talk together, and the sight of you has brought back the happy old times—that it was you I wanted. Don't you believe me? Come, Nita; let's make friends. Come!"

She had loved this man, and once a woman has loved, it is hard for even a man's cruelty and perfidy to stamp out every vestige of such love from her heart. Like the root of the ground-ivy, leave but a remnant in the soil, and the plant will spring up again to grow and flourish if the sun but shine on it. He got his arm round her, and drawing her to him, kissed her on the lips. It was a Judas kiss; but though she suspected its falsity, she accepted it. "God forgive you if you are deceiving me, Ralph!" she said, hoarsely.

He swore, with an oath that made her shudder.

"Deceiving you! Why should I? Aren't we one—aren't we in the same boat, to swim or drown together? I am so glad to get you back, that, by George! if you like, I'll go with you up to the house and announce you as my wife. It will mean ruin, but I'll do it!"

"No, no!" she said, faintly. "I meant to denounce you; I swore to myself that I wouldn't make terms with you; that I'd ruin you; but—but I can't do it now! I'm half suspicious that I'm a weak fool in giving way, but—"

"You're doing the right thing," he said, with a confidence which fed on her weakness. Look here; you go back to the town. Where are you staying—at the hotel?"

"No, at lodgings," she replied, listening reluctantly, and yielding at every word.

"Go back to your lodgings, and pack up and leave for London by the morning train. I'll follow you."

She looked at him and shook her head.

"I can't trust you!" she said. "No; we go together or not at all! Besides, I'm engaged to play one more night here."

He laughed impatiently.

"What the devil does that matter?" he said, scornfully. "Break your engagement."

"No," she said, very quietly; "I never have, and I won't do it now. The manager has kept faith with me—has been *kind* to me. Come what will, I'll play for him to-morrow

night. You might know me better than to think I'd break my word, Ralph."

He bit his lip and shrugged his shoulders.

"A pretty thing—a countess playing at a music-hall! Well, there! have your way. I won't argue with you."

She drew away from him. Her doubts of him, a vague suspicion, rose in her mind.

"Besides, I want to think," she said. "I haven't promised to agree to your plans. No, I will not promise to-night. I want to sleep on it."

He watched her face, lined with doubt and uncertainty, and knew that he might lose the advantage he had gained if he attempted to force her.

"All right," he said. "Only promise one thing: that you'll give me a day's grace if you mean to round on me—give me time to clear out and hide my head somewhere. But there! you'll do what I want, you'll fall in with my plan, Nita?"

"I don't know; I'll see," she said. "I'll meet you here to-morrow night, after the performance, at this time, and tell you what I have decided."

"Very well," he assented.

"God knows if I am right in listening to you, in thinking of it at all!" she said, with suppressed bitterness.

She went without another word, and Ralph sank on to a seat and covered his face with his hands. The coldness of the night aroused him from his stupor, and he went up to the Hall. His man Parkins was waiting for him, and, like a well-trained servant, suppressed all signs of the astonishment and curiosity which his master's white face and confused air produced in him.

"Been drinking worse than usual," thought Parkins.

"I'm going to have a pipe," said Ralph. "Don't you wait."

Parkins followed Ralph to his den and took off his boots, stirred up the fire, and placed the whiskey decanter and soda-water bottle on the table by his side. But Ralph did not want any soda water. He tossed down a glass of neat spirit, then began to pace the room with jerky, uncertain steps, his hand up to his head, his under-lip twisted and awry. He went over the whole scene again and again, and as he mentally repeated and reacted it, the bitterness of detection, the rage of baulked passion grew more intense. The woman who was his wife had turned up, and to save himself from exposure, from the shame and disgrace which her denouncement of his

desertion of her would bring, he must go away with her and return to Ratton with her as his newly made wife. It was the only way out of the dilemma. But what a way! He must seem to have jilted Lady Mary. Well, he could manage to avoid the scandal which would cling to such a charge. She would give him up all too readily—he knew that. He would resign her to-morrow morning. Resign her! the beautiful girl for whom his ignoble passion burnt like molten lead! Resign her, this lady, this daughter of a peer, his equal, for a deserted wife, a music-hall singer!

The blood rushed to his head at the thought, and he was deafened by a singing in his ears. To lose Lady Mary! His hand shook as he lit his pipe, and his breath came with so painful and laboured an effort that the smoke burnt his parched throat. To lose her! And she would be glad—would marry that beast, Edward Bryan!

A string of oaths escaped his hot lips, and his hands closed spasmodically and so tightly that the nails pierced his palms.

He had told Nita that he had thought she was dead. Why hadn't she died? Why had Fortune given him rank and wealth if she had saddled him with a low-born, vulgar wife, a woman at whom these friends of his would turn up their noses? Why wasn't she dead? If she were only dead!

At the thought, the mere mental formation of the wish, something stirred within him, something that made him grow hot and cold, that half blinded him by the intensity of the emotion which it aroused. It was the spirit of murder.

People died of all sorts of things—heart disease, scarlet fever, accidents; why hadn't something of the kind happened to her? Why should she have lived to blight his life, to come between him and the beautiful young girl he had won? Yes, won by his own cleverness and tact.

If he had sprung at her and choked her as she stood there taunting him!

He shuddered and stopped short in his feverish pacing, and looked from side to side, as if he feared that some one might hear the horrid thought, that the very wells might catch it and echo it.

He resumed his pacing up and down, stopping now and again at the small table to drink, and filling pipe after pipe with the strong tobacco; and at last physical and mental exhaustion set in, and he stumbled up the broad stairs to his room.

As he did so, he looked over at the historic Hall with a *half-stupe*fied air.

He was the Earl of Ratton, and he was married to a common music-hall girl who wouldn't die. Curse her!

Meanwhile, Nita wearily made her way to the lodgings.

She too was torn by conflicting emotions. She had intended to denounce Ralph, to claim her rights, to exact her revenge; but the sight of him, the sound of his voice, his insidious pleading, had weakened her resolve. Should she yield to him? Better, if she meant to relinquish her revenge, to go away, to leave him in peace, to do what he would, to commit bigamy even. Better to sheer off from him altogether.

She went up the stairs wearily, but as quietly as she could; but Stella, who was lying awake, heard her.

"Is that you, Nita?" she asked as Nita paused at the bedroom door.

Nita went in and stood beside the bed, looking down in a kind of dream at Stella's beautiful face, framed in the now long and luxurious hair.

"Where have you been? You are very late," said Stella. "And how—how tired and worn you look! Has—has anything happened?"

Nita seemed to awaken from her dream, and bent and kissed the red, half-parted lips.

"Yes, something has happened—I think," she said. "I—don't know yet. Good-night."

Stella raised herself on her elbow and returned the kiss.

"You look so tired, so worn out," she said. "Has the performance been very hard work to-night?"

"Yes—very hard," replied Nita, with a strange smile; then, as she gently forced Stella down to the pillow again, she said: "You are very pretty, my dear. God grant you may never have cause to be sorry for it!"

Then she went away quickly.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

While Ralph the earl had been drifting from passive vice into actual crime, Rath and Edward had been working with an energy which, if a little less feverish than before, was impatient of every darkening hour. Their golden harvest, a treasure trove which falls to the lot of few men, was comparatively easy to get at, and they amassed—it is the only word that suits—a large quantity of gold in the nugget and in dust.

This they packed into boxes, which Rath made of strong planks, groaning at the waste of time; for to these two men

every occupation which took them from their gold-digging was regarded as an imposition hard to bear.

As each box was filled, it was buried in a corner of the hut; and Rath and Edward used in the evening to lie full length before the fire, resting their aching limbs, and speculating as to the value of their daily increasing hoard. Then, when they had come to something like an agreement, they would fall silent. Edward would think of Mary, of her surprise and delight at his wealth, and picture their meeting; and Rath would dwell upon his memory of Stella, and wonder whether his share of the gold was to be of any use to him; for assuredly, if she were lost, all the money in the world could not console him.

When the Indians arrived, the two men, who had timely notice of their approach, left their work at the precious hillside, and made up the bundle of pelts and other produce, and Edward cautioned Rath to seem as keen in his dealing, lest the Indians should suspect the existence of the gold. They had brought two carts drawn by shaggy ponies in pairs, and Rath bargained for one of the carts, explaining that he wanted it for hunting purposes. The Indians were not very willing to part with it; but Rath tempted them with good barter, and a cart and a couple of ponies were left behind when the Indians took their departure.

Rath and Edward watched them ride away with a sigh of relief.

"They suspected nothing?" said Rath, with anxious interrogation.

"No," said Edward; "but you can never tell; and in case one of them happened to be sharper than the rest—they say that gold has a scent which proclaims its presence to the man who has once handled it in the rough—we will stick up notices of claim in the workings."

They returned to their toil in the morning, but after a day or two Edward began to grow thoughtful. He would lean on his pick or shovel, and gaze before him with an absent, wistful expression which Rath noticed and understood, though he said nothing; and he was not surprised when, one evening as they lay before the fire, Edward said, with a flush of something like shame:

"Rath, I can't stand it any longer! Don't be angry, old chap. I've held my tongue and fought against the fever within me for some days, hoping that it would pass; but it's got the upper hand of me, and—and if we don't get away I *shall go mad.*"

Rath nodded in his silent way; but though he was silent, he was full of sympathy. A warm mutual regard and affection had grown up between the two men, and they had learnt to read each other's thoughts, as men do when they have been living together alone for some time.

"To make it worse, I had a dream last night," Edward went on, half shamefacedly. "I dreamt that Mary was ill, or in some trouble—I couldn't quite make out which; but I woke with a cry, I think—"

"I heard you," said Rath, succinctly.

—"And found I was bathed in perspiration. That dream haunted me all day—it's absurd, of course; but—" He passed his hand through his hair and sighed. "Then the sight of that cart has unsettled me, Rath; the thought that we have the means of carting the stuff away, and the reflection that the trail to Vancouver is still open, but may soon be closed by the snow." He rose and paced the narrow space. "We're rich men, Rath, at the present moment. Heaven only knows how rich prospectively. We could either come back, or sell the diggings; in either case we should be worth —oh, I can't calculate! Let us go!" he broke off, suddenly.

Rath looked up gravely.

"I am ready," he said, simply. "I am willing to go or to stay, but I'd rather go. I have only been waiting for you. You have a distinct hope, while I—"

His head drooped and he shut his lips tightly.

Edward laid a hand on his shoulder.

"We'll hope that your chance of finding her is a good one, Rath," he said. "Let what may await me at home, I'll help you look for her. In simple truth, I don't think I could be happy if you were not. We've been good friends, you and I, Rath; more like brothers than friends, and come what will, we won't be separated."

Rath took the hand Bryan stretched out to him and pressed it in his strong grip.

"I sha'n't write to my people," said Edward, thoughtfully. "In the first place, I—well, I want to surprise them. Everybody there thinks of me rather pityingly as a kind of bad egg, and I want to enjoy the amazement which they will exhibit when they find that I've been able to make a fortune after all. Sounds rather weak and childish, but—"

"I understand," said Rath. The simple words had become almost a formula with him by this time.

"Then, again, I feel that if I wrote I must let the cat out of the bag; and it wouldn't be safe. The dear mother would

open her heart to someone, our secret would be known, and in these days of telegraphs and ocean greyhounds it wouldn't be long before the diggings were like an ant-hill. No; we'll cart the stuff to Victoria and get it aboard a ship."

"Not sell it there?" asked Rath.

"No, no! Everybody would want to know where we came from, and the mine would be discovered. No; we must get the stuff to London, shipping it as ordinary merchandise, and sell it there, and, if we decide to do so, the mine itself. 'The Island Gold Mining Company, Limited. Capital'—what shall we put it at, old chap? Two, three millions?" he asked, with a laugh and a flush of excitement. "'Pon my word, I don't think the latter sum would be too heavy."

Rath nodded. He was not in the least excited. Two, three, four millions were all the same to him if he could not recover Stella.

They constrained themselves to work until they had filled the sixth box, then they commenced to make their preparations for departure. Rath looked round the hut with a sad wistfulness on the last night. It was his home; it was more than that: it had been the home of Stella, and the birthplace of the passionate, enduring love which still engrossed all his mind and heart.

"You won't take more than you can help, Rath?" said Edward, as Rath proceeded to pack a box.

"No," said Rath. "There are some things of my father's—the books—they would be spoiled if they were left behind, and—I think that is all."

He had already sewn the small tin case, which he had found under Stella's pillow, inside the pocket of his coat.

"The rest can remain. If—if I don't find her, I shall come back," he added, quietly.

"We'll find her, I'm sure of it!" said Edward, almost solemnly.

Rath went on packing the books silently. As he was taking them from the rough shelves he came upon an old leather writing-case. It was stained with dust and mould, but it was quite sound, and locked.

"What have you got there?" asked Edward, as Rath turned the thing over and regarded it gravely.

"Something of my father's," said Rath. "It is full of something—papers, I think."

Edward looked at it curiously.

"These are his initials, I suppose? Have you got the key to it?"

Ralph shook his head.

"No," he said, thoughtfully. The sight, the touch of the old case, recalled his father. "I won't open it now."

"They might be papers of importance and value," suggested Edward; "aren't you at all curious?"

Rath looked up dreamily.

"No," he replied. "Why should I be? What does it matter—now?"

"Well, put it somewhere safely, and where you can get at it," said Edward. "In England, in the world, we attach a great deal of importance to such papers as that may contain; and you're going there, you know, old fellow."

Rath put the case amongst the books, and paused in his packing to realise that he was leaving the island, the place in which his father had immured himself, the place in which he had advised his son to remain, in solitude and safety.

Next morning they loaded up, concealing the boxes with bundles of skins and fodder for the horses, and then sat down to their last meal in the hut. They were silent and thoughtful, and Edward heard Rath sigh as he closed and barred the door of the hut, and Bryan strode off to the cart in the clearing that Rath might say his good-bye unnoticed.

Once they had started, Edward's restlessness began to diminish; and too much thought and care were required through the long journey to permit either of them to dwell overmuch on the future and the fate of the women they loved. They reached Victoria at last, and Rath's amazement at its streets and houses and the number of people in them amused and interested Bryan; though he admired Rath's quiet way of taking things; for Rath was never open-eyed or open-mouthed, not even when he realised that his "island" was only part of an island.

"Oh, yes, it's a big place; but, my dear fellow, wait until you see London!" he said; "and, oh, Heaven! how I wish we were there!"

At the docks, the advent of these two stalwart young fellows with their mysterious and heavy boxes caused some astonishment and not a little curiosity; but Edward, who managed this part of the business, conducted it so calmly and coolly that he secured a passage in a departing vessel and got the boxes safely on board without exciting much comment; and he entered their room at the hotel radiant and flushed with the excitement of success.

"Safe on board, old chap!" he cried in a whisper. "I could have flung up my hat and danced on the quay when I

saw the last box lowered into the hold. And now for a visit to the tailor's!"

Rath looked gravely up and down his companion and himself, and Edward burst into a laugh.

"My dear Rath, if we walked through London in this get-up, we should be mobbed by the children—to say nothing of the men. Come on! We'll buy some ready-made togs suitable to two young chaps too poor to afford anything better than a second-class passage."

For Edward had deemed it prudent to book second; he did not want to reawaken curiosity and interest on the quay by going first-class. Like old Mother Hubbard's dog, they went to the tailor's, and the good man, accustomed as he was to stalwart men, gazed admiringly and somewhat doubtfully at Rath's magnificent proportions.

"I'm afraid I sha'n't be able to find anything ready-made large enough to fit you, sir," he said. "You're so very tall and so very broad across the chest."

Rath, who, like all giants, was rather shy, looked half ashamed of his height; but Edward laughed.

"They don't make many larger then, my friend, do they?" he said. "Never mind; do the best you can."

The tailor had to let out and lengthen some suits; and that afternoon Edward had the pleasure of surveying his friend clad in regulation blue serge, in which Rath looked singularly correct and distinguished. He was so indifferent to his appearance that he was free from embarrassment and awkwardness, and Edward watched him covertly as he moved about, and with a feeling of curious perplexity; for he had expected that Rath would display a little awkwardness in the unaccustomed clothes.

"They fit you very well, old chap," Edward could not help remarking; "they haven't quite a Bond Street cut, and —and you wear 'em as if you were born in them."

"Do I?" said Rath, placidly. He had had his hair cut and had put on a pair of new boots. "They're not so comfortable as the old things, but I shall get used to them. I miss the moccasins most, I think," he said, with a touch of regret in his deep, musical voice.

"Do you? You conceal it with admirable art, then," retorted Edward. "Upon my word, as I look at you, I can scarcely believe that you are the fellow that I've known in moccasins and a jumper! Sure you aren't a nobleman in disguise, and been roughing it awhile just in a spree?"

Rath smiled.

"Do clothes make any difference in England?" he asked, quietly.

Edward groaned in despair.

"My dear old man, they make *all* the difference! In England you had better be dead than badly dressed, because seedy clothes are the badge of poverty, and poverty is the worst of all possible crimes in the world we're going to. You'll soon find that out, my pretty innocent. With money in your purse you can break the whole Decalogue with impunity; but if you're poor, look out! Every man is against you, and there's only one refuge for you—no, two—the prison and the workhouse, with the prison for preference."

Immediately they had reached Victoria, they had commenced to make enquiries after Stella, and they continued to do so until the vessel sailed; but no one had heard of the finding of a boat with a girl in it, and Rath's heart sank under their failure to learn tidings of her. But Edward cheered and encouraged him.

"She could not have drifted here, and the vessel that picked her up was homeward bound, depend upon it," he said, confidently. But Rath could only sigh and shake his head. It was not always that Edward could inspire him with hope.

They sailed the next day, and the interest they had aroused in Victoria was excited by them in their fellow-passengers. Rath was quite unconscious of the curious and, on the part of the women, admiring glances, which followed his refined and handsome face and his stalwart figure; and, at first, moved about the part of the vessel reserved for the second-class passengers with an absorbed and preoccupied way which only increased the curiosity and interest; but presently a little incident, or, rather, an accident, roused him.

Some children were playing about the deck, and one, a tiny mite of a girl, whose mother was down with seasickness, fell over a chain.

She got up crying bitterly, and Rath strode across to her and lifted her in his arms.

She added tears to her other emotions as she felt his great arms round her; but as she looked up into this giant's grave, kindly eyes, the tears vanished, and she cried quietly.

Rath had never had a child in his arms before; but he had once soothed Stella's weeping, and the same instinct came to his aid now.

"Don't cry," he said; and the child was so astonished at

so soft and gentle a voice coming from such a great frame, that she stopped in sheer bewilderment.

When Edward came on deck, he found Rath seated on a coil of rope in the stern sheets, with the child asleep in his arms.

Rath looked up, as if nursing small children were the most natural occupation in the world—as it is, when one comes to think of it—and said, warningly:

"She's asleep. She fell and hurt herself."

They were in sight of the upper deck, and Edward caught sight of a group of ladies and gentlemen looking down at them. There was amusement on the faces of the men, but something better in those of the women.

Edward sat down beside Rath until the mother, with tremulous anxiety and gratitude, came to claim her child.

"I'll carry her down for you," said Rath, who seemed surprised that so small an act should call forth such gratitude. "She'll wake if I give her to you, and that would be a pity."

From that hour, Rath, when on deck, was always accompanied by a child or two, and was often to be seen marching up and down with the little girl in his arms. He was not only popular with his fellow-passengers, but with the crew; into the fo'c'sle he soon made his way, and one day Edward found him gravely bearing a hand in setting a sail, as if he were on the ship's books as an able-bodied seaman.

Of course, in the first-class saloon, they talked about the young giant and his friend, and some of the ladies addressed questions to the captain, but he could give them no information.

"They are both gentlemen, one can see," remarked a lady; "and the tall one is quite distinguished-looking. I heard him telling stories to the children this morning—they were all round him like—like chickens, and his voice had quite the proper *timbre*. I am sure he is somebody above the common."

"Very likely," assented the captain. "It wouldn't be the first time a gentleman has crossed second-class, or steerage even."

"Couldn't we—couldn't you invite them to dinner, or something?" suggested one of the other ladies, shyly; but the captain shook his head.

"Against the regulations," he said. "Second-class passengers not allowed to pass the barrier, you know."

"That's so like life, isn't it?" said the lady, with a sigh.

Rath was not only unconscious of the interest he excited

in the minds of the first-class passengers, but almost unconscious of their very presence. He had glanced at them on the morning of embarkation, had noticed that some of the women were pretty, that all were, as far as he knew, well dressed; but his interest in them stopped at that. There was only one girl in the world for him, and when the children were packed away in their berths for the night, and he and Edward were pacing the deck in the moonlight, Rath would gaze at the wide expanse of sea and think of Stella, and ask with aching heart if it had swallowed her life, or whether she still lived and he should find her. How intense, how acute that question became as they neared land may be imagined but not described.

"In a few hours we shall be in England," said Edward in a low voice, one night as they stood watching the wake of the vessel. "We shall have to stop in London for a few hours—all depends on what time of the day we land—and then I'll take you home, Rath. Yes, I know," he went on quickly, as he saw Rath's brows come together—"I know that you want to begin your search at once, without the loss of a moment; and so you shall; but no time will be lost in consulting my people. My governor—my father—will be able to help us; he will know the quarter in which we should first set about making enquiries. Nothing shall be left undone, no chance neglected, and—better than all this, Rath—no money will be spared. Your happiness is almost as much to me as my own; and Mary, when she hears the story— There, there! I won't say another word; but you'll see! You'll see, for one thing, how gratefully my mother will welcome the man who saved my life, the best and truest friend a man ever had! Oh, Rath! if we were only there!"

They reached port at last, and Edward hurried Rath off to the Metropole. There was no need for further concealment of their position, and Bryan will be pardoned for the natural desire to astonish Rath with an experience of a big hotel.

Rath was lost in amazement, but silent, as they passed through the crowded streets; but he kept quiet, as he had done in Victoria, even when they were shown into one of the Metropole's best private rooms.

They had arrived in the middle of the day, and Edward was anxious to get to the bank before it closed.

"I sha'n't be long," he said. "And I've only got one thing to say: don't leave the hotel on any account."

"I'm not likely to," said Rath, with a smile, as he stood at the window and viewed the stream of cabs and carriages,

the barges and steamers on the river, the vast pile of the Liberal Club and Whitehall Court. "I feel that if I were to step outside the door, I should be swallowed up."

"You probably would be," said Edward, laughing. "I sha'n't be very long; amuse yourself by trying to count the number of cabs. Do anything but leave the hotel."

Rath spent the time leaning against the window corner, lost in reverie, and thinking how hard it would be to find any person in this mass of human beings; and after some hours Edward burst into the room, and flinging his hat from him, exclaimed, laughingly:

"We're right, old fellow! Look there! That's a cheque-book." He flung the narrow, oblong book on to the table. "That means money—almost to any extent. Funny, isn't it? I'll explain it presently. I've had a high old time, and have enjoyed myself vastly, as the old plays say. Been to our bank; asked for the chief, and sent in my name; was admitted after a time, and was received with a kind of courtesy which means, 'My time's short, young man, and it means money, and as your business probably doesn't, cut *it* short!' I talked about the weather for a minute or two, until he glanced at the hand-bell on his table, then, in a few sentences, I sprang it upon him.

"He didn't believe me at first; but we Bryans have an awkward and sometimes embarrassing character for veracity, and when I showed him the specimens and told him how many boxes there were of it—true to sample, he turned so red and looked so puffy that—he's rather fat—I was afraid he was going to have a fit of apoplexy. Nothing would do but we must go down for the cases at once. They're in the bank strong-room now, examined and resealed, and we can draw for any amount we like, up to fifty thousand pounds, my boy!

"The manager insisted upon seeing me into my cab—he gave me two fingers to shake when I entered the room—and wrung my hand with something like tears in his eyes.

"I drew a little cash for us to go on with"—he laid a neat packet of crisp bank-notes on the table beside the cheque-book—"and the first thing I buy to-morrow will be the swaggerest diamond bracelet for the dear old mater, and—and a bunch of flowers for Mary. Oh, forgive me, Rath!" he broke off, remorsefully. "No, old chap, I haven't forgotten your unhappiness in my new-found joy. I looked in at the advertising agents as I passed, and to-morrow there will be an ad-

vertisement, which Miss Mordaunt will understand at once, if she should see it—and she will.

"Rath, we shall find her, I am sure of it! And now we'll go down to dinner. We ought to be in swallow-tails—evening-dress—but never mind; we can console ourselves with the reflection that we can afford to wear cloth of gold if we choose."

He drew Rath's arm within his and descended the broad stairs.

As they were crossing the vestibule on their way to the dining-room, a gentleman came from the smoking-room, and both he and Edward stopped short and uttered an exclamation.

"Why, Lisle!" said Bryan, shaking hands warmly. "It's good to see the face of a countryman so soon! We're only just arrived from Victoria. Are you stopping here? Are you going to dine?"

Lisle had flushed with pleasure at the sight of his old friend; but the flush had faded, and Edward saw that he was looking pale and haggard.

"I'm delighted to see you, Bryan," he said. "It is such a surprise, too. I did not know that you were coming home."

"No; I've kept it quiet because I wanted to surprise them at home—in more ways than one. The fact is—you won't say anything about it, Lisle?—I—that is—we have had a slice of luck. I've not introduced my friend and partner, Mr. Rayne."

Lisle turned, and Rath held out his hand. As Lisle took it and looked into the handsome face of its owner, and met the regard of the grave, sad eyes, Lisle started slightly.

"I—surely I have seen this gentleman before!" he said, with a somewhat puzzled frown.

"No, indeed, you haven't," said Edward, with an emphatic laugh. "This is the first time Rayne has been in England."

"I beg your pardon," murmured Lisle to Rath. "I hope you will enjoy your visit."

"Help him to do so. Come and dine with us, Lisle!" exclaimed Edward.

Lisle shook his head.

"I'm sorry. But I'm leaving London, and have only time to catch my train."

Edward walked with him to the door.

"How—how are they all at home?" he asked in the casual

way with which a man masks his eagerness and anxiety. "Lady Cecilia—and—and my people, and—Lady Mary? All well, I hope, Lisle?"

Lisle nodded and looked down at the pavement. Should he tell Bryan that the girl he loved was engaged to marry another man—Lord Ratton? He had only a moment in which to decide, and he decided in the negative. There was no time to break the news—his cab was waiting—and to deliver it like a knock-down blow was impossible.

"They are all well," he replied. "You are going down—"

"At once—to-morrow," said Edward, his eyes sparkling. "I'm simply counting the hours."

Lisle looked at him rather wistfully and sadly, and Edward felt constrained to notice his altered appearance.

"But I say, Lisle—excuse me—but you don't look in your old form. Have you been seedy?"

"No," said Lisle. "That is—yes. No, no! I have been well enough; but I've had something to worry me—I can't tell you—there isn't time. I shall see you down at home in a day or two. Good-bye!"

He hurried into his cab, and was driven off, and Edward went back to Rath and took his arm again.

"The luck is still running strong—for me, at any rate, Rath. I've just heard from that old friend of mine that they are all well at home. Now, if there had been anything amiss with Mary he would have told me. So much for dreams! I never did take much stock in them, and I shall take less for the future."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

EDWARD was too restless to spend the evening in the smoking-room of the hotel, and, seeing that Rath was brooding over Stella, he took him off to the Empire. It would be interesting to discover what Rath thought of that beautiful place and the entertainment provided by the liberal manager; that he must have been astounded is certain, but his face expressed nothing more than grave attention. As they entered, and for some little time after they were seated, he looked with a kind of suppressed eagerness at the faces of the women who passed and repassed them. But presently he ceased to watch them. Something—Heaven knows what instinct—told him that he was not likely to find Stella amongst them.

"I will still refrain from asking you what you think of

London," said Edward as they were smoking their very last pipe before going to bed. "It must surprise you pretty considerably. Do you like what you've seen of it?"

Rath considered the question for a moment or two, then he replied, rather reluctantly—for it seemed ungrateful to Edward for bringing him there: "I don't think I do. It is too crowded; there are too many people—too many houses. I feel as if I could not breathe—to-night, at that music-place, I felt as I felt when I had the fever. I should not like to live here; I don't think anyone could who had spent nearly all his life on the island."

"I shake hands with you there," said Edward.

"I don't think Stella is here," said Rath in a low voice. "She would feel as I feel—that she could not live here."

"Unless she were obliged to," said Edward, thoughtfully. "But we shall soon know. I've a kind of idea that you and I are partners in luck as well as in other things, and that, as I'm in luck, you must be, too. To-morrow I shall see the woman I love—shall claim her. Oh, I mustn't begin to talk of it, or I shall want to talk all night!"

They went upstairs to their rooms, but, though the night was cold, Rath's apartment, spacious as it was, seemed airless to him. He looked out of the window at the river flowing in the moonlight under the bridges and past the Embankment, and to look was to desire to be out there. He smiled at Edward's injunction that he was not to leave the hotel—but he certainly could not lose himself if he kept in sight of the vast building. He put on his coat, which he had taken off, and went out, crossing the road and gaining the Embankment.

He walked up and down, thinking of Stella, wondering whether indeed he dared share the hope, and accept the assurance, of her safety which Edward held out to him so confidently; and now and again he stopped and leant against the parapet, or went down one or two of the steps leading to the river's edge, and gazed at the turbid stream as it flowed thickly and heavily on. As he paused at one of the flights of steps, he saw a man crouching in a corner, and apparently asleep. Rath, feeling in his pocket for some money—he had already learnt the use of it!—went up to the man and touched him on the shoulder. In an instant, and much to Rath's surprise, the rough—a villainous-looking fellow—sprang up, uttered an oath, and struck out at him half fearfully. Then, as he saw that the disturber of his peace was not that natural foe, a policeman, he swore again by way of apology.

"Here's some money—I suppose you want it—don't lie

there," said Rath, throwing him a half crown. The man caught the coin dexterously, and stared after Rath as he walked on again. As Rath did so, he saw a gentleman step out from the shadow of one of the deep embrasures and come towards him, and evidently lost in thought, and as he drew nearer, Rath was astonished to see that he was the Lord Lisle to whom Edward had introduced him that afternoon.

Lord Lisle seemed lost in thought, and Rath was too shy to stop and speak to him; so the two men passed each other. Rath walked on, and paused in the shadow from which Lisle had just emerged, and, naturally, looked after him. At the moment of his turning, he saw Lord Lisle pass the steps on which Rath had interviewed the sleeping rough, and saw the man come crouchingly up the steps, look round eagerly, and then, as Lord Lisle turned and paced back, slink down out of sight.

Rath, unsuspiciously, wondered what the man was after; but he was not left in doubt long; for, just as Lisle passed him, where he stood in the shadow, the footpad sprang after Lisle noiselessly, got close behind him, and raised what looked like a short thick stick—it was really an iron "jemmy"—in the very act to strike Lisle on the back of the head.

Rath made one spring; the man, overwhelmed by Rath's vast bulk, swerved aside, and the iron jemmy fell slantwise on Lisle's shoulder. Lisle turned in amazement, an amazement which paralysed him, as he saw Rath deal the man a cuff on the head, then force him backwards to the stone wall of the Embankment, hoist him, as if he were a bag of flour, and drop him over into the river. Then, before Lisle could recover from his astonishment, Rath, setting his hat straight, came up to him, and said, quite calmly and gravely:

"I hope you are not hurt?"

Lisle could only gasp for a moment or two; then he stammered:

"No, I'm not hurt. He struck me on the shoulder."

"It is well that it wasn't your head," said Rath, picking up the jemmy. "It's iron."

"And would most likely have killed me!" rejoined Lisle, with the modern awkwardness and embarrassment which kept him from saying: "You have probably saved my life," though he thought it. Then he remembered the man. "The fellow will drown!"

"Yes; if he can't swim," assented Rath, so coolly that Lisle stared at him. "Why shouldn't he?" asked Rath, answering the stare. "He meant to kill you."

"To rob me, certainly," said Lisle, as he ran down the steps.

Rath followed him more leisurely—for, from his uncivilised point of view, it did not seem to matter whether the wretch sank or swam—and they saw the rough drag himself along, by the chain suspended to the wall, to the next flight of steps, up which he rushed and disappeared.

Then Lisle turned to Rath.

"I'm—I'm very much obliged to you, Mr.—" he hesitated. "I'm sorry to say I didn't catch your name this afternoon," he said, frankly, but with the shyness which falls upon us nowadays when we are strongly moved.

"My name's Rayne," said Rath. "There is no need to thank me. There was no trouble, no difficulty."

Lisle's amazement rose again at the grave coolness of the response.

"You must be as strong as Hercules!" he said, admiringly. "The fellow was no lightweight."

"Yes, I suppose I'm strong," said Rath, in a matter-of-fact way; "but he didn't struggle much."

Lisle smiled.

"I should think not! He was half stunned by that blow of yours. He was after my watch and chain!" he added.

"Meant to steal it? With all these people about?" said Rath, with surprise.

Lisle laughed.

"Oh! it would have been done in a moment. He would have knocked me down, got my watch and chain and emptied my pockets, and left me here—to be 'run in' as a 'helplessly drunk.' It's quite a common thing for people to be assaulted and robbed on the Embankment; it's a large place, and the police can't be all over it."

"Then why do you come here?" asked Rath, in his direct way. "I thought you said you were leaving London?"

There was something in Rath's handsome face, in the frank, grave voice which won on Lisle—strangely yet forcibly. The young men walked side by side in silence for a moment, then, as if he could not help himself, as if he were constrained by the subtle influence which Rath unconsciously exerted, he said:

"I did intend doing so, but I changed my mind. The fact is, Mr. Rayne, that my movements, just at present, are governed by impulse. I am in great trouble."

He bit his lip and hesitated. Nowadays we don't open our

hearts to acquaintances of a day's standing, notwithstanding that they may have saved our lives.

"I have had the misfortune to lose a—a very dear—friend, and I am searching for her; scarcely searching for her; but—well, I go nowhere, do nothing, but with the hope of finding her— What is the matter?" he broke off to enquire, for Rath had stopped short, and was looking at him with an intent gaze.

Here was another man who was searching for one who was lost.

"Nothing," said Rath; for he was not the man to return confidence for confidence. "And can't you find her?"

"No," said Lisle, sadly. "And—and, indeed, I have no right to search for her—I mean—that—she has forbidden me to do so; but all the same, I cannot rest until I know that she is safe and sound."

Rath drew a long breath. He was thinking of Stella.

"So, though I had decided this afternoon to return home," continued Lisle, "I—well, I have changed my mind. But I shall go to-morrow, for I am convinced, something seems to tell me, that she is not here, in London."

"I should think no one would be here who could help it," said Rath, "unless they wanted to be stifled. I came out for air. Is your shoulder hurt?"

Lisle shrugged it.

"No; nothing to speak of; but I can't help remembering that it might have been my head; and—and—believe me, I am very grateful, Mr. Rayne. You are travelling in company with my old and very dear friend, Bryan; I hope we shall meet again. I live near his people, at Lisle Abbey. I need not say that I shall be more than glad to see you there, that I shall be bitterly disappointed if I do not."

He held out his hand, his face flushing with the emotion against which, in obedience to nineteenth-century etiquette, he was fighting.

"Thank you," said Rath, simply. "Good-night."

Lisle looked after the young giant, as he crossed over to the hotel, with admiration and gratitude, and a still lingering amazement. He had never met a man like him, so cool, so grave, so evidently inexperienced, and yet such splendid "form."

"I met your friend—Lord Lisle—on the walk beside the river last night," Rath said to Edward at breakfast next morning; he did not add that he had saved him from a footpad, for Rath, uncivilised as he was, had an instinctive dislike

of recounting his own deeds of daring and posing as a hero. "I went out to get some air."

"Oh, did you?" said Edward, rather absently—for he was intent upon a Bradshaw. "Thought he'd left London. I shall wire to them to meet the train at Ratton at seven o'clock. I want to run down to the bank again to see about the sale of the gold. By the way, I'm taking a free hand in all this business, Rath."

Rath nodded.

"Do just what you think right and best," he said, almost indifferently; for, as a matter of fact, the wealth to which Edward attached so much importance did not seem to count much to Rath.

He would have given every penny of his share to learn that Stella was alive and safe and well.

Edward came back from the bank, where, as he laughingly told Rath, he had been received with an *empressement* only second to that which is accorded to royalty, and they caught the twelve-o'clock train from Waterloo.

To both of them it seemed a long journey—to Rath an interminable one. Edward was in a fever of restless impatience, and Rath, absorbed in his thoughts of Stella and her fate, looked out of the window with the expression of one who sees nothing.

A little after seven they reached Ratton.

"In an hour or little more we shall be home," said Edward. "I must see her to-night, Rath. You won't mind my leaving you for an hour or two?"

Rath thought of Stella.

"No, no!" he said, with a sigh. "I understand."

"Dear old chap!" said Edward, laying his hand on Rath's arm. "Your turn will come presently; and I shall share your joy, as you share mine. We are partners, Rath."

The train, for the latter part of the journey, stopped at every small station, and Edward worked himself into a fever of impatience; but at last they reached Ratton.

He sprang out, and nodded to the station-master.

"How do you do, Harding? Thanks, yes, I'm glad to get back. There's a fly for us, isn't there?"

"Yes, Mr. Edward," said the station-master, "there's a fly for you; but I don't think there's anything for Lord Ratton."

Edward looked round; then he saw that the station-master was regarding Rath.

"Oh, that isn't Lord Ratton," he said, laughingly.

"That's a friend of mine; quite a different man. See after the luggage, will you?"

He ran down the steps, followed by Rath, then stopped with an exclamation. For there was a phaeton at the bottom of the steps, with a groom at the horse's head, and seated in the phaeton was—Lady Mary!

He stood stricken dumb by her presence; and presently she became aware of him.

She turned her head, uttered a cry—was it of fear?—and sat motionless, her white face turned to him.

"Mary!" he exclaimed. "Mary!"

She swayed to and fro, as if she were about to fall, to faint; her hands tightened on the reins so that the horse started and flung up its head.

Edward was beside the phaeton in a moment, clutching it spasmodically.

"Mary! Forgive me for coming so suddenly, without warning, forgive me! But why are you here?"

She fought for her voice. His presence filled her with mingled joy and terror.

"I—father is coming from Silverton—he has lost his train, I suppose. Oh—Edward!"

The cry went to his heart.

"I'm a brute not to have written, to have told you!" he said; "but I wanted to surprise you. It was childish, inexcusable, but forgive me, Mary, dearest!"

The last word was a whisper, for Rath's tall figure had approached.

"Rath, *she's* here!" Edward whispered in a frenzy of excitement and emotion. "She's here already! And I thought I should have to wait some hours. Luck! Luck's with me! Mary," he looked up at her white face, "this is my friend and partner; the best friend, the best partner ever a man had! Rath, this is Lady Mary Hatherley—the—the— Oh, Mary! I've told him about you; he knows who you are!"

Mary, cold to the lips—say, rather hot and cold—looked at Rath, standing still and impassive as a statue.

"I—I am glad," she faltered. "How—how do you do?"

Rath took off his hat instinctively, and looked from one to the other. Edward, his partner and his chum, had met with his love thus early. He glanced at the phaeton and saw that there was only room for Edward.

"You go," he said, "I'll follow in the other carriage," moving towards the fly.

"*Will you?*" said Edward in an under-tone. "That's

like you, Rath! Well, I accept, for oh, my dear old chap, I've so much to say to her! So much!"

"I'll follow," said Rath, gravely.

Edward sprang on to the step of the phaeton.

"Father!" said Mary, faintly.

"I'll send for him—come back for him!" exclaimed Edward. "I want to talk to you—to tell you— Oh, Mary! my heart is bursting! Let me come with you!"

Even then she hesitated; but Edward sprang into the seat beside her, the groom let the horse go, and climbed into the rumble behind.

Rath looked after them thoughtfully. He did not feel deserted. If it had been Stella who had been waiting them, he would have driven off and left Edward to follow. Love has its privileges.

He went towards the fly which Edward had wired for, but looked at it reluctantly and critically. He had been cooped up in the train, remember.

"How far is it to the Court?" he asked.

"Six miles by the road, sir, but a little less, maybe, by the wood."

Rath's face lifted. He had spent a number of hours in the train—the prospect of a six-mile walk was very pleasant.

"I would rather walk," he said; then, as he saw the flyman's face fall, he produced a half sovereign and gave it to him. "Which way?"

"Straight through the wood, sir," said the flyman. "You can't miss it. You keep straight till you come to the plantation, then you turn to your left."

Rath listened attentively.

"Thank you," he said.

Then he hesitated. It is not only the woman who hesitates that is lost.

"Perhaps I'd better go along the road with you. No, I'd rather walk. Good-night!" he said in his grave way; and he made for the path the flyman had indicated.

CHAPTER XXXV.

EDWARD, as he seated himself beside Mary, looked over his shoulder and waved his hand to Rath, with the kind of gesture which a man uses when he is in the seventh heaven of happiness; then looked up in Mary's face, saw that it was still white, and that her hand was trembling.

"I'm a thoughtless idiot to have startled you so!" he mur-

mured, penitently. "I ought to have written or wired; but— Oh, I wanted to surprise you, Mary! Let me drive; it will give me something to do and keep me quiet."

She resigned the reins, and he dexterously changed seats with her, his hand lingering on her arm in a mute caress as he did so.

"I've so much to tell you," he said in a low voice, that the groom might not hear; though the man, with whom Edward was a favourite—with whom was he not a favourite?—leant back and delicately shut his ears, so to speak. "I don't know where to begin. And it will sound like a fairy story. And yet there have been many cases like mine—but I never thought I should go through such sharp and sudden vicissitudes. Are you warm, dearest?" he asked, tenderly, and he drew the fur wrap more closely round her, his eyes seeking hers with the passionate love which after all these months had now an opportunity of expression.

Still trembling, she put his hands from her. She could not tell him that he must not call her his dearest, for she could not speak; and alas! the deep joy of which the lover feels in the presence of the loved one overwhelmed her.

"You know, dearest, that I wrote some months ago saying that I was going into the wilds on a solitary expedition? My mother has shown you all my letters, Mary?"

"Yes," she managed to say; but the word was but a whisper.

"Well, I was terribly down on my luck. Things had been going against me in a way they have when a man particularly wants them to go well, and I started feeling desperate. I'd got to work for a prize that a man might well give his life for the winning, and I saw no way of making the fortune I wanted so badly. I won't weary you, dearest, with an account of my trials and troubles—"

Weary her! Did he not know how precious every word was to her? she wondered.

—"One day they culminated—in a wood at the back of nowhere. I'd been seeking pelts—that's skins, furs, dear—and I'd found 'em with a vengeance. I was set upon by a pack of wolves—"

Mary shuddered and closed her eyes.

—"And I think they would have got me down and—and ended the chapter; but, as if he'd sprung from the clouds, the man you saw just now—isn't he a splendid fellow, Mary? The grandest, truest man God ever made, poor chap!—well, *he came to* my aid, and just saved me. He took me home to

his place, to a hut in a clearing, where he lived all alone like Robinson Crusoe— Oh! I'm dying to tell you all about him! It's the most curious, the most pathetic history, and sounds like an improbable romance, which proves that truth is stranger than fiction; and when you hear his story, and know him, you'll like him for himself, Mary, as well as for his great and amazing goodness to me."

His voice vibrated with emotion as he said this; the emotion one generous man feels when he is talking of the generosity of another.

"I asked him to take me as a partner, and he consented, and we worked for some time, getting pelts and scraping along together. And then one day I made a discovery—at least, I happened upon *his* discovery, for, Mary, the gold was his before I found it. We must never forget that."

"Gold?" she murmured, with a sharp note in her sweet voice.

He laughed.

"Yes, gold. I found it on a hill-side, and not a few specks and grains, but nuggets and slabs. What is the matter, dearest; are you cold?"

"No, no!" she replied, almost inaudibly. "Go on!"

"It is found so sometimes; and the lucky man who comes upon it jumps from poverty to wealth in a few minutes. Mary, I was like one possessed when I saw it, and thought of all it meant to me—and to you, dearest. I saw your sweet image hovering beside me, I could almost hear your voice, see the tears in your eyes, tears of joy—as I looked at the yellow heap that meant—ah, what did it not mean to me!—happiness and joy unspeakable. I knew, as I held a nugget in my hand, that I had won the prize, that I had gained the right to claim you. Oh, Mary! some day I will try and tell you how I rushed to the hut and broke in upon my friend and partner. He took it coolly—poor fellow, he was in trouble that all the gold in the world could not lighten; and he had left it there, intending to leave it there till the crack of doom, for all he cared. And I should have felt the same if I had been in his place, and Heaven had bereft me of the girl I loved."

He leant a little nearer to her, and touched the sleeve of her sealskin jacket with his lips; and though Mary knew that she should have drawn away from him, should have forbidden him to caress her, she could not move or speak.

"Well, to cut out the details—but you shall have them."

some day, Mary—we worked our mine for some time, as men work when every stroke of the pick, every turn of the shovel means solid wealth, until I could stand it no longer. We were rich, fearfully, tremendously rich already. There were prospective riches in the mine itself, riches almost beyond computation, and I felt that if I did not come back and see you and tell you, I should go mad. I wanted you, Mary. They say that the possession of gold kills love; but it only increased and strengthened mine. I dreamt of you, I saw you standing beside me as I worked. My partner sometimes asked me why I left off, and what I was gazing at. It was the vision of you, dearest. And at last I said I must go, that I could stay away from you no longer. Another man might have resented my sudden resolution, might have argued with me; but Rayne—God bless him for the truest friend a man ever had!—yielded at once. We packed up our gold and carried it to Victoria. I've got to tell you about that journey, too, Mary, some day. What heaps I have to tell you—got it safe to London—it is in the bank cellars, Mary—and—and here I am."

He paused for a moment, but went on, having scarcely got his breath.

"Here I am, dearest, to claim my love. I can go to your father now, not boldly—who would dare to ask for you boldly, Mary!—but with a clear conscience, with a fortune to lay at your feet, a fortune which counts as nothing when set against the priceless treasure I want of him, but one which may persuade him to give you to me. Does it all seem like a wild romance? Ah, that is what it has seemed to me until I saw you, heard your voice to-night. Sometimes I have started awake from a dream that the finding of the gold was only a dream, have started up with a cry, and have fallen back on my pillow, thanking God that it was the *dream* that was unreal, and that the gold was an actual fact."

His lips quivered as he said this, his voice shook, and his head drooped for a moment. Too sudden a joy has its pains and penalties as well as too sudden a grief.

She knew, and her heart throbbed in sympathy with every swift emotion of his, and her hand slid towards his; but suddenly she drew it back and shuddered. She was forgetting for a moment that she was going to slay this joy of his with a sudden stroke which would be all the worse, more acute and terrible for its being dealt by her hand.

He became conscious of her silence, and looked up at her.

"*Speak to me,* Mary, dearest! Just tell me that—that

you are glad. Of course I know; but I want to hear you say it."

"I—am glad," she said, hoarsely.

He laughed.

"When I've taken you home I'll go back for your father, and we'll come back together—they'll forgive me at home when they know where I've been, whom I've met. Rayne will tell them. Mary, dearest, I can scarcely believe that I'm sitting near you, that I can touch you with my hand. Put your hand in mine, dearest! I cannot kiss you—the man—but if you will take your glove off for a moment—"

Her pale face went whiter and her eyes closed.

"I—I cannot!" she said, in a hoarse whisper. "It—it is not my own—now."

He looked at her, not understanding in the least, looked at her with a faint, questioning smile.

"Not your own?" He laughed softly. "No, it's mine now, mine—mine! And can't a man do what he likes with his own?"

He looked at her, looked wistfully at the sweet lips, as a man gazes who has been waiting many weary months for the kiss that shall repay him for his waiting. Then they were passing through the Hatherley gates at the moment, and the light from the lodge window fell upon Mary's face—he was startled by its pallor, but more by the agony in every line of it.

"Mary!" he said in a low voice. "What is the matter? Are you ill? Tell me, dearest!"

As he spoke, he put his left arm round her; but she drew away from him, shrinking as far into the corner of the phaeton as possible.

"Mary," he asked, amazed and startled, and with just the shadow of a terrible fear and doubt crossing his mind, "what is it? Have I said—done anything?"

"No—no!" she responded, with a sob catching her voice and almost choking her. "Oh, how can I tell you, how can I? It is cruel—cruel—cruel! Edward"—she faced him with sudden resolution, the resolution of one driven to bay and facing the death which he has brought on himself—"Edward, it—it is too late."

"Too late?" he echoed, dully. "What is too late? I don't understand. For God's sake, Mary, don't—don't keep me in suspense. Explain! It—is torture—what has happened, why do you look at me like that—speak to me in this way?"

"Can you not guess?" she said, almost inaudibly, with her hand at her throat, as if she were suffocating. "Oh! must I speak plainly—can't you spare me? Oh, God! have pity on me—and him!"

The prayer was only breathed, as such prayers are, but he caught it. His hand gripped her arm, and his face, white as her own now, was near hers, his eyes bent on hers as if he would wring the truth from her.

"What do you mean? Speak! Mary, you—you have not— Ah, no! I had your promise, and you are too true—too true!"

"My promise!" she wailed.

"Yes," he said, sternly. "You have kept it, Mary? Come to me!" The groom had got down and was walking up the gentle rise in the avenue—walking in fear and trembling. "Come to me!" He dropped the reins and held out his arms. "You are mine—you belong to me!"

"No, no!" she gasped.

"No! What—what do you say? If not to me, then to whom? Wait! hold on!" he cried, hoarsely, for he read her answer in her face. "Give—give me time!" he fought for breath, and stared before him, his teeth set hard. "Now, then—quick! Put me out of the misery of suspense. You say that you are not mine. Is it true? My God! it can't be true that you have been false to me!"

Her head fell, and she covered her face with her hands.

"Yes!" he stammered, dully—"yes, false to me! Mary—*you!* Oh! I must be mad! I must be dreaming? Who"—he could scarcely go on—"who is it?" he asked at last, hoarsely.

"Lord Ratton!"

He started, and turned on her.

"Your promise! You have broken it!"

Her lips formed the "No," but it did not leave them. Of what use to remind him that she had promised not to marry Lord Ratton "if she could help it?" Better to let him think her wantonly false to him—better to let his scorn and contempt for her kill his love—better, far better for both.

"And—and you have done this damnable thing of your own free will?" he demanded, his voice thick and almost inarticulate.

For an instant she hesitated. Her heart, racked with love, cried out to her: "Tell him the truth! Throw yourself on his breast, and clinging there, find refuge and safety!" But

honour, though its voice was but a whisper, made itself heard, and silenced that of love, so that he caught the word:

"Yes."

He shook as if under a heavy blow, as the ox shakes in the shambles.

"My God!" broke from his white lips. "False—false—*you!* Oh, Mary! may God forgive you—as—as I—no, I cannot!"

The horse, left to itself, had walked up to the bottom of the steps and stopped. The groom, full of trouble at the trouble of his mistress and "Master Edward," whom he had played with as a boy, stood sorrowfully waiting. Edward seemed to wake with a start.

"You are home," he said in a dazed, confused fashion. "I'll—I'll go. Let me help you down."

She held out her arms, then shrank back; and, smitten with sudden agony at the significant gesture, he drew away from her, and she got down unaided.

He looked down at her, with the agony in his eyes which one sees in those of a dumb animal whose anguish is intensified by its mute helplessness.

"Yes, I'll go," he said, and he turned uncertainly and with a staggering gait. Then he turned back again and approached her. "I—I spoke harshly to you just now," he said, hoarsely. "I—I beg your pardon. I—wish you every happiness. Oh, my God! Mary, it's hard to believe—hard to believe! *You* false!"

She stood motionless, white to the lips, her eyes fixed on him in despairing imploration, and all unconsciously she put her hand on his arm.

He looked down on it in a dull fashion; then he took it from his arm, held it a moment, then let it fall.

"Not mine—not mine any longer!" he said, almost mechanically, and turned and left her standing there.

Some hours later he entered the hall at the Court—a weary, mud-stained man who might have been walking for miles. At the cry which the butler gave at the sight of him, Lady Bryan rushed out of the drawing-room with his name on her lips.

"Edward!" she cried. "Edward!"

He caught her as she fell forward, and after a moment or two she fought against the faintness, and, with the tears running down her face, drew his head down to her and kissed him.

"Oh, Edward—you know—I see you know!"

"Yes, mother," he replied, hoarsely. "I have seen her —I have heard from her own lips—"

"A cruel—wicked girl!" she sobbed.

"Hush! No, no! We won't say a word—I couldn't bear it, mother! Let me go to your room for a minute or two—just a minute or two."

With his arm round her they went upstairs. We shall not follow them. There are some scenes too sacred for even the modern novelist.

At last Edward remembered Rath, and started guiltily.

"My friend, mother! God forgive me, I had forgotten him! I'll go down to him!"

His mother looked at him with sudden fear in her streaming eyes. Had the blow driven him mad?

"What—what friend, Edward?" she asked, soothingly.

"Rath—Rath Rayne. He came on here. Why do you look at me like that, mother? He is here, is he not? He has told you that we are rich—" He broke off with a sigh. The gold was of no use to either of them now. Was there a curse upon it?

"Edward, I—I don't know what you are talking about. There—there is no one here," she faltered.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THAT day Ralph the earl did not leave the Hall. He said that he was ill; and the excuse was not an empty one; for what with the excessive drinking and the terror and emotion of the preceding night he was in a condition approaching mental and physical collapse.

He had not been able to sleep at night, he could not sit still during the day, and he paced up and down his "den," drinking glass after glass of brandy and soda, and smoking the black strong cigar which his soul loved.

He had got over the terror which Nita's sudden appearance had caused him, and in its place was a hatred of her, which grew more intense with every hour. It seemed to him the mere spite of fate that he, so young, so popular, so rich and highly placed, should have his life sacrificed because of his early and imprudent marriage. If he had only been single, if he had not committed the fatal folly of marrying the low-born music-hall singer, he could mate with Lady Mary, whom he persuaded himself that he loved; for whom he had indeed that gross passion which answers with men of Ralph's nature for love. As the day wore on and he realised all that he was

going to lose—not only the most beautiful and charming of girls, but the social success which he had attained with so much trouble and tact, self-denial and watchfulness—his rage grew more bitter, and his loathing of the unfortunate woman who was tied to him became deeper and more fierce.

He thought of all kinds of expedients, of ways of getting rid of her; but he knew of none which would be successful. He would willingly have given her any sum, to the extent of half his fortune, to remain in the background, but he knew that Nita was not to be bought off; indeed, he might consider himself fortunate if he could persuade her to fall in with his plans, and go off with him quietly, concealing the marriage, and pretending that they had only recently met. It was the only way to save his name in the county, to render it possible for him to continue living at the Hall.

He had some dinner sent into his den, but he could not endure even Parkins near him, and he sent the man away. He could eat nothing, but he nearly finished the bottle of champagne which he had ordered; and after drinking it, he threw himself on the sofa and fell into an uneasy doze.

He dreamt that he was living in the wretched room in the London slum; that Nita, worn and haggard, was cooking a bloater, the scent from which was stifling him. He woke with a start, to find that the lamp was smoking. He got up and turned down the wick, drank some soda water, and looked at his watch. With a start he saw that it was time to set out if he meant to keep the appointment he had made with Nita. And what else could he do?

He cursed her fluently as he put some bank-notes in his pocket and opened the French window. Then he paused suddenly, and, after a moment's consideration, took off his soft hat, concealed it behind the sofa, and rang the bell.

Parkins answered it—and brought a fresh bottle of whiskey—just as the waiter at a German hotel brings a glass of beer when you ring; the chances are all in favour of its being the thing you rang for.

"I feel sleepy, and think I'll go to bed," said Ralph, yawning. "You needn't trouble to come up until I ring; perhaps I shall have a doze before I undress. And don't let anyone disturb me, mind! I fancy I've got a touch of this beastly influenza."

He went up the stairs yawning, and Parkins, looking in at the pantry on his way to the servants' hall, remarked confidently to the butler:

"Strikes me that his lordship will have to put the brake

on. Seems to me that he's not very far off an attack of D. T. He has just the look my old guv'nor had when it was coming on. And his lordship mixes so! It was whiskey in the morning, brandy and soda in the afternoon, and champagne at dinner; and I suppose he'll wind up with whiskey in his bedroom. He's 'not to be disturbed.' I know what that means."

The old butler shook his head. The Rattons whom he had served for so many years had not been conspicuous for their virtues, but they had none of them been drunkards, though some of them had drunk deeply on festive occasions.

"It isn't our way to take to liquor in this common style, Mr. Parkins," he said, sadly, and with an ominous shake of the head.

Ralph noisily locked his door, and moved about his room for a minute or two, as if he were undressing, then he stood still and listened; and hearing no servants about, softly unlocked the door and returned to his den by the back staircase. Here he got his hat and noiselessly let himself out by the window. He had not exchanged his morning suit of dark serge for evening-dress, and as he slipped along the park under the shrubbery, with the collar of his ulster turned up, it would have been very difficult for anyone to recognise him, for the moon had waned, and the night was now not particularly light.

He made his way through the trees to the left of the avenue, and having reached the spot where he had arranged to meet Nita, stood in the shadow of one of the big elms and waited.

He waited, with sullen rage depicted in his downcast eyes and set lips, for a quarter of an hour; but she did not come. Then his hate gave place to fear. Had she decided to make no pact with him, to proclaim their marriage and expose him? The sweat broke out on his white face, and he cursed her. Anything would be better than such absolute ruin! Half mechanically, he crossed the avenue and went through the wood in the direction of the town. If she would not come to him, he must go to her. He must make terms with her, must get her away from Market Ratton.

He had reached the thickest part of the wood, and was necessarily walking slowly and carefully, when he heard something moving in front of him. He stopped and was about to call "Nita," but checked himself even as her name was on his lips, and followed silently and as quickly as he could. The footsteps receded and grew fainter, and Ralph presently

lost them. He stopped again, perplexed and uncertain, then turned to retrace his steps. As he did so, his foot struck against some small, hard substance—something which, as he kicked it, rang like metal. He looked about for it, feeling in the bracken with his foot and hand, and after a minute or two he came upon a clasp-knife. He picked it up and looked at it in the faint moonlight. It was a large and heavy knife, with a single blade, and looked as if it had had some wear. There were some initials engraved on the shield, but the light was not good enough for Ralph to decipher them.

"Some d——d poacher!" he muttered. "I'll track him to-morrow by this knife. I wonder where he's gone, and if he saw me?"

He turned the knife over in his hand, looking at it absently; then he opened the blade. It was sharp at the end like a dagger, and in every way a formidable weapon.

"Very likely he'd have stuck this into me, if I'd come up with him, the infernal scoundrel!" thought Ralph. "Yes; I'll have you safe and sound in Ratton jail before to-morrow's out, my fine fellow!"

He slipped the knife in his coat-pocket and moodily went on through the thick undergrowth. Suddenly he heard other footsteps, lighter ones this time, and he drew behind a tree and waited. By the uncertain light he saw that it was Nita. Her face was pale and wore an anxious, uncertain look. She looked old and worn and haggard, and Ralph as he watched her felt his hatred of her rising like a sullen fire within his breast.

As she came up to the tree he stepped from behind it, and she recoiled with a subdued cry of alarm.

"Hush!" he said, with a half-audible oath. "Do you want all the place to know you're here?" Then his tone changed as she regarded him coldly and doubtfully. "Why, where have you been, Nita? I've been waiting and looking for you everywhere."

"I lost my way," she said in a low voice. "There were people on the road near the entrance, and I entered by one of the small gates, thinking I could find my way to the avenue, but I could not. I was going back—or what I thought was back to the town, when I heard you."

"When was that?" he asked; "and where?"

"Ten minutes ago, and over there."

He knew that she had not heard him, but the other man, the poacher; but he did not correct her.

"Well, now you've met me, I hope you've made up your

mind, Nita," he said, as ingratiatingly as he could. "I hope you see that the plan I proposed is the only one. We'll go to-morrow—I'll meet you in London."

She shook her head.

"No," she said, in a faint voice. "I have made up my mind. I will not do that."

His face darkened.

"Why not?" he asked, sharply.

"It would be of no use," she said, wearily. "Someone would be sure to recognise me, someone who knew me when we were living together, and the discovery that we had tried to deceive people would only set them talking all the more."

"But, d—n it, do you mean to tell me that I'm to own up to having been a married man—" He stopped and bit his lip as the pale face lit up with scorn.

"Yes, that is your great fear, Ralph," she said. "That is what you dread. You are ashamed of me. Wait; I know you; it is of no use your trying to deceive me. You are ashamed of me and the past. Oh, I don't blame you. It's what a man like you would feel; it's in your nature and you can't help it."

"If you've come to abuse and bully me—" he began, sullenly.

"No," she said, in a dull way, passing her hand over her brow; "I have come to make a bargain with you. Last night you offered, if I'd consent to a pretended marriage, to make a countess of me, to share your title and your money. I don't want them, Ralph. I shouldn't be happy if—if I came back to you. I should know all the time that you only lived with me because you could not help it, that you were regretting all the time that you'd married me."

"Nita, I swear—"

She shook her head and made a weary gesture with her hand.

"It's the truth, and you know it. No, I won't trouble you, Ralph. I'll go away, quite out of your life—as I have been ever since you deserted me—and I'll never come near you or claim you."

He watched her keenly, cunningly.

"Sounds likely, doesn't it?" he said, with a sneer.

"I promise," she said; "and I keep my promises, Ralph. There is only one condition. I don't want any money—I've enough, can earn enough for myself, as I have done—all I want is that you should promise, on your part, to break off

with—with the young lady you were going to deceive and betray."

He started, and thrust his hands in his pockets, glowing at her under his half-closed lids.

"Oh, that's it?" he said, with the twist of his under-lip.

"Yes," she said. "I can save her and any other girl you may attempt to lure into a false marriage. I can do that, and will do it. Give me your promise. But I don't need it. You'd break it if you could; but I'll take care you don't. While I'm alive I'll watch you."

His hand became conscious of its contact with the knife, and closed over it.

"I see," he said. "You'll play the spy on me—you'll dog me day by day, and perhaps change your mind and, when you're short of money, blackmail me."

She raised her head, her scorn of him glowing in her dark eyes.

"I would rather die than touch a penny of yours, Ralph," she said, quietly. "You may go your way, do what you please, so long as you release the poor unhappy girl you have trapped, God knows how! for she doesn't care for you; I saw it in her face as she drove by. I've made enquiries in the town. She doesn't care for you, Ralph; she will be glad to be free."

Mechanically he had got the knife open, and his hand was closing spasmodically on the haft.

"I want to save her from you, and I will," Nita went on in a low but resolute voice. "Yes, even if I have to go to her and tell her the truth, as I will."

The blood rushed to his head, and the trees seemed to waver, the earth to rock in the madness of his passion.

"You will, will you?" he snarled, almost inarticulately. "You will?"

Warned by the terrible look in his bloodshot eyes, by the stealthy movement of his right hand, she recoiled and uttered a faint cry.

He sprung upon her, with the knife uplifted, and stabbed at her twice, blindly, but with terrible force. One stab would have been enough, but even as she threw up her arms and fell, he struck again with mad and brutish rage, and so wildly that, as she dropped at his feet, the knife flew from his hand.

He stood above her, panting, his teeth clenched, his eyes blazing, scarcely conscious for the moment of what had happened, what he had done. Then suddenly he realised it.

"Nita!" he cried, hoarsely. "Nita! Get up! I—I

didn't mean— Why did you nag at me and raise the devil in me? I didn't mean—"

Then he dropped on his knees beside her, and felt for her heart.

As he did so, his hands grew wet, and he shrank back and looked from the hand to the sightless eyes upturned to the sky as if mutely denouncing him, as if appealing to Him who has said vengeance is His.

He staggered to his feet, and leaning against a tree, tried not to look at the face again; but his eyes seemed drawn to it by some irresistible power. Presently he awoke to the deadly peril in which he stood. Every moment he remained there that peril increased. He must fly, and at once. But it was some minutes before he could move, for the face held him by a loathsome fascination, and when at last he moved from the spot, he still looked over his shoulder at his victim.

He had now got a dozen yards before he remembered the knife, and, with a start, pulled up. He forced himself to go back for it, and searched for it with shaking hands; but he failed to find it, and with the sweat breaking from every pore, he rose and fled into the thick darkness of the wood.

* * * * * * *

The flyman had told Rath to go straight through the wood. Now, "straight" meant straight to Rath, whether a path lay before him or not, and he took a bee-line with the ease and skill of a backwoodsman. As a result of his obeying the injunction too literally, he emerged from the wood at a little hamlet called Team, which was in exactly the opposite direction to that which he should have taken for the Court.

He went to the small inn to enquire, was informed of his mistake, and hospitably invited to rest before setting out again. As it seemed to him that there was no particular hurry, he sat down on the settle beside the fire and talked to the innkeeper. The man, after a moment, brought a pasty and a mug of ale, and Rath, who was hungry, was glad enough to see them.

Absently, he took out the big knife which he had used on the island for years, and which he had brought with him as a matter of course; but as the innkeeper placed an ordinary knife and fork beside the plate, Rath shut up his knife again and put it in his pocket.

"That be a useful tool, sir," remarked the innkeeper, smilingly.

"Yes," said Rath, in his grave but pleasant fashion. "I have done a great deal of work with it."

"Have you, now, sir?" commented the man, obviously surprised that a gentleman should need such a knife."

"Yes; it is an old friend, and I should be sorry to lose it."

He ate the excellent pasty and drank the ale, then rose—the innkeeper eyeing him admiringly—and having paid the small sum asked, started for the Court again, not at all upset by his long and futile walk. Perhaps he thought that it would be better that Edward should reach the Court before him.

He resolved to leave the wood for the high-road as soon as possible, but, oddly enough, he made rather a round of it. At last he struck the path, when suddenly he heard a strange sound. For a moment he thought it must be the cry of an owl or some other night bird; but there was just a doubt in his mind whether it might not be that of a human being in distress, and, as a doubt was sufficient for him, he turned and walked quickly in the direction from which the cry had proceeded, going with the unerring instinct which his strange life on the island had brought to perfection.

He had not to go far; and his foot had almost touched the body lying amongst the bracken before he saw it.

He bent over the still form and raised it in his arms; it was wet with something more than dew, and he saw—felt, rather—that she had been stabbed. He set the body down gently and struck a light, looked round keenly, and saw that the bracken had been beaten down near the body and in a line from it. He was about to call for help when he heard footsteps approaching, and calmly and sadly he returned to the body and waited.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

RATH knelt beside the body and waited. There was no need for him to call out, for his quick ears had noticed that the footsteps were approaching, and in a minute or two a man came running through the wood.

As he saw the two figures, the motionless one on the ground, and the almost as motionless one bending over it, he stopped short, as if puzzled, and struck a match.

Small as the light was, it permitted him to see the scene, and, with loud cries for help, he flung himself upon Rath.

Rath was overborne by the suddenness of the attack, but he sprang to his feet and seized his assailant, who, quite helpless in Rath's grip, shouted:

"Murder! Help!"

Almost immediately, certainly before Rath could recover from his amazement and put any question, two other men rushed in upon the scene, and, after a moment, joined in the attack upon him.

One of them carried a lantern, which he set upon the ground, and its murkish light lit up the extraordinary scene.

If Rath had been conversant with the English mode of procedure, he would have understood the peril in which he was placed, and the fact that his resistance to capture would prejudice him, he would have given in and asked for an explanation. But Rath understood nothing of what was happening, and only knew that he was being assailed, apparently without reason, by three men, and instead of submitting to capture, he set his back against a tree and fought with a cool and calm determination which discomposed his assailants.

He hurled the first man from him as if he were a bundle of straw, and struck the second so terrible a blow that the man reeled and staggered under it; the third, realising he had to deal with a Hercules in strength, and one whose eye was as quick as his hand, drew back and blew a whistle.

Then he approached cautiously, and backed by his mate, who had recovered sufficiently to render him assistance; but Rath, who was not likely to remain content with mere defence, sprang upon the man, felled him with his left arm, and gripping the other, bore him to the ground. As he fell, the man shouted:

"Better give in. Better surrender—we've help at hand; there are some more of us near. What's the use of killing me?" for Rath's hand was on his throat, and Rath's eyes were flashing angrily.

"Why do you attack me? Do you want to rob me?" he demanded, sternly.

At this question—which must have sounded extraordinary to his assailants—the man under him uttered an exclamation of amazement.

"Oh, come, mister, that won't do. Take your hand off my throat. What's the use of trying to get off? Better give in. There's been murder done—and we found you here, by the body."

Rath's face went white with rage and indignation, and he shook the man as a cat shakes a mouse.

"Do you dare to say that I killed her?" he said, sternly.

For answer, the man called to his mate:

"Come at him again, Fred. The fellow's choking me."

Rath released him and sprang to his feet to confront the

others; but at this moment there came a rush of men from behind Rath, and he swung round to meet this new attack.

For a moment or two the silent woods resounded with the cries of angry and injured men, the trampling of feet, the fall of heavy bodies. Rath fought with the strength of ten men, the dogged courage of an Indian.

The lantern had been overturned in the struggle, and the swaying, rushing, and inextricably confused group looked like shadows in the semi-darkness.

Suddenly from above the tumult a voice cried:

"Get a light—get a light, someone!" and at the sound of the voice Rath started and uttered an exclamation.

"Edward!" he cried. "Edward!"

"My God! Rath, is it you?" responded Edward. "Keep back, men! Stop! don't strike him! I know him! A light—a light!"

Rath cleared a circle by a sweep of his iron arm, and stood in the centre waitingly. One of the men recovered the lantern, and, lighting it, held it above his head, and Edward and Rath gazed at each other with dumb astonishment.

Edward was the first to speak.

"Great Heaven, Rath, it *is* you! What are you doing here? Why are you fighting with these men?"

"Ask them," he replied, sternly. "I don't know."

The man who had first attacked him pushed his way through the edge of the circle.

"It's a lie; he knows well enough!" he said, wiping the blood from his face. "A murder has been committed. She—a woman has been killed. I found him standing over the body—caught him in the act—"

"Murder! Rath!" gasped Edward, looking in a bewildered fashion from Rath's firm face to the excited ones round him. "What—what—nonsense is this? I know this gentleman; he is a friend of mine—"

"I can't help that," said the man. "If you doubt my word, look behind that tree—" He pointed in the direction of the body, and Edward stepped forward, and uttered a cry of horror.

"A doctor! Quick! one of you!"

One of the two gamekeepers who had attacked Rath, and who had been examining the body, shook his head gravely.

"No use, Master Edward," he said; "she's dead, poor thing!"

Edward stood, completely overwhelmed for a moment or two, then he looked round.

"Who said—who accused my friend? It is absurd; but who—"

"I did, and do!" came the sharp response. "I saw him there kneeling over the body. I tried to secure him—"

"Who are you?" demanded Edward, scarcely knowing what he said in his confusion and horror.

"My name is Workley," said Workley, evidently struggling with his emotion.

"What were you doing here? Why were you here in the wood at night?" asked Edward.

Workley stifled a groan.

"I know her," he replied, almost inarticulately. "I was a friend of hers—I— Oh, my God! dead!"—he could not go on for a moment—"I saw her this evening going towards the wood, and—and I followed her."

"Why?" demanded Edward, sharply.

Workley's head drooped, then he raised his small, bird-like eyes, not keen and hard now, but dim with pain.

"I—I was going to marry her—we were to have been married," he said, hoarsely; then he broke out fiercely: "Why do you ask me questions? Why don't you take him and ask *him* why he was here?"

Edward instinctively turned to Rath, who stood with folded arms; his handsome face, bruised and bleeding, clearly seen in the light of the upheld lantern. Every eye was turned upon him. His gaze met Edward's calmly; and there was something in the pure dignity of the blood-stained face, the unconscious pose of the superb figure which, even at that moment, extorted an unwilling admiration from the men who had attacked him, even from those who had suffered pretty severely from his Herculean blows.

"Do you know her, Rath?—but that's impossible! What am I asking? Were you standing beside her—how did you find her?"

One of the gamekeepers, with that love of fair play which an Englishman displays, even when he has been battered and bruised by his opponent, broke in hesitatingly:

"P'r'aps it ain't fair to ask him, Master Edward. There's evidence enough, I'm thinking, without any from his lips."

Rath did not understand the interruption in the least.

"I lost my way," he said, with quiet dignity. "I heard a cry, and made for the spot. The woman was lying on the ground, as you see her. She was quite dead."

Workley and one of the gamekeepers had gone to the body, and Workley cried out:

"Stabbed! Search him for the knife!"

The circle closed round slowly, cautiously, but Rath held up his arms.

"Do not touch me! What is it you say?"

"The knife! The knife!" said Workley, coming forward with uncertain steps.

"The knife—my knife? You think *I* stabbed her?" exclaimed Rath, his face flushing with indignant scorn. "*I* kill a woman! You are mad! I will give you my knife."

He put his hand in the left pocket of his coat, then drew it out and searched in the other pockets, a look of surprise and annoyance growing on his face.

"I can't find it. I have lost it!" he said, almost to himself.

The group murmured ominously.

"Secure him!" said Workley. "I—I charge him with her murder. I—" His voice died away, and he put his hand to his throat as if he were choking.

The circle grew smaller; but Edward, who had gradually succeeded in freeing himself from the spell of horror which had well-nigh paralysed him, broke through, and standing beside Rath, placed a hand upon his shoulder.

"Stand back! Let no man touch him! He is my friend; he is innocent; he is incapable of such a crime. Stand back! I will be responsible for him. He will go with me quietly; he will answer any questions to the police. Rath, my poor fellow, there is some terrible mistake; you must come with me and explain it."

"Yes," responded Rath, simply, with a simplicity and gentleness which amazed the crowd. "But I have explained. I know no more than I have told you."

"Why didn't he give in—surrender? Why did he show fight and try to get away?" growled one of the men, resentfully and suspiciously.

"They struck me," said Rath to Edward, as if that were more that sufficient explanation. "What else could I do? If I did hurt them, it is their own fault."

"Yes, yes. He did not understand!" Edward tried to explain, but feeling how futile any attempt at explanation must be before these men, well acquainted with the law of arrest. "My friend is a stranger, and does not know that one should not attempt to defend one's self under such circumstances. His showing fight proves his innocence. And he *is* innocent, that I know, and he will be able to prove it. The poor woman has been stabbed by some other man; we shall find him,

he cannot escape. Is that the doctor?" he broke off, as a figure passed him with a quick nod.

It was the doctor, and some of the men followed him to the body. In a few minutes, almost immediately, he came back to Edward.

"She has been dead some time," he said, gravely, as he turned down his shirt-sleeves. "She has been stabbed—there are three cuts—an ordinary knife. Who is this?" he enquired, as his eye fell upon Rath.

"The man I found beside the body," said Workley.

The doctor took the lantern and held it close to Rath, his professional eye scanning the stern face, and running up and down the stalwart figure. Suddenly he laid his hand upon Rath's coat-sleeve. There was blood upon his face, but only the blood that comes from a cut lip or skin scratch; the deep red patch on the sleeve was of a different character. The doctor's face grew impassive.

"Let the body be taken to the nearest house. I will go with it," he said.

"And I will go with my friend to the police station," said Edward. "He is innocent."

As the words left his lips, a man rushed into the group, crying agitatedly:

"The knife! the knife! I've found it!"

He held it up, and the doctor took it and flashed the lantern over it. Every one closed in and pressed round, gazing at the blood-stained knife with the fascination of horror.

"There are some initials on it," said the doctor. "Yes: 'H. R.'"

Rath strode forward, and pushing the men aside, held out his hand.

"That is my knife," he said, calmly. "Give it to me, please."

The seeming callousness of the speech filled the listeners with amazement, and a hoarse murmur arose, a sound of indignation which gave place to one of doubt and uncertainty; for Rath's calm and unshaken self-possession were staggering.

"I had better keep this," said the doctor. "Do you still say it is yours?"

"Yes," replied Rath; "it is mine."

Edward seized his arm and looked up at him with a terrible trouble in his eyes.

"Your knife, Rath? Look again. Great Heaven! how can it be yours? It was found near the body; it is stained *with blood.*"

"It is mine," said Rath, as calmly as before. "I do not know how it came to be there; I must have dropped it."

A murmur of incredulity arose; but only a faint one. The grave, handsome face did not look like that of a murderer; the manner was rather that of a man who is surprised and puzzled, but not in the least afraid. Indeed, Rath was not at all apprehensive about the strange mistake, the singular ring of circumstances which encircled him.

"This is a terrible business," said the doctor. "There is only one thing to be done, Mr. Bryan. Your friend must place himself in the hands of the police. My trap is in the road and is at your service. I will go with the body to the inn."

Edward beckoned to Rath. As they moved away, some of the gamekeepers followed them—Workley had gone with the doctor and the dead woman—but Edward motioned them back.

"There is no need to accompany us," he said. "I am still answerable for my friend."

As they drove to Market Ratton, Edward endeavoured to obtain a detailed account of the way in which Rath had spent the evening; and Rath answered his questions readily enough, and without a sign of uneasiness.

"It seems incredible that you, of all men, Rath, should lose your way in a wood," said Edward. "Oh! if I had only not left you! I deserted my friend, and this is the result. I am punished for my selfishness."

But Rath would not have this.

"What does it matter?" he said, calmly. "I did not kill the poor woman, Edward."

"No; but—but—I don't want to alarm you, Rath, but don't you see that some persons may think you did? You say that the innkeeper at Team saw and remarked upon the knife—you had it there, you see?—and it was found near the body by which you were discovered by Workley. You see—you see?"

"Yes," assented Rath, quietly. "But I didn't kill her. Why should I? I never saw her alive. I had no reason for killing her."

"Yes, that is in your favour," admitted Edward; "but all sorts of motives will be supplied by those whose duty it is to fix the guilt upon you."

"But why should they want to make me guilty?" asked Rath, in his ignorance of our legal system. "Why don't they look for the man who did it? Why, if I had thought of

it, I could have tracked him through the bush, or I could have done so if it had not been beaten down and the tracks crushed out by those men who attacked me."

Edward stifled a groan.

"There again! Of course, the footmarks could not be traced now. Who could have done it? There must be someone who desired the poor woman's death. We must have a good detective. Don't be uneasy, Rath; no stone shall be left unturned."

"I am not uneasy," said Rath, as calmly as before.

As they drove through the village, Edward pulled up and sent a pencilled note to the Court, saying that his friend had "met with an accident," and that he—Edward—might not be home for some hours. They reached the prison, at which tidings of the murder had already been received, and Edward found the superintendent awaiting them. He received them with official gravity.

"My friend will tell you all he knows of this awful business, Mr. Locke," said Edward.

"Perhaps he'd better say nothing at present, Mr. Bryan," said the superintendent; but Rath made his statement, and Mr. Locke took it down.

"I shall have to search the prisoner, Mr. Bryan," he said.

Edward bit his lip.

"Certainly; Mr. Rayne will have no objection," he said. "Empty your pockets, Rath."

Rath did so; but of course the superintendent "went over him."

"There is something here," he said, touching Rath's breast.

"Yes," assented Rath. "Let it alone, please."

Mr. Locke looked surprised and a trifle suspicious.

"I must ask you to give it to me," he said.

"Give it to him, Rath; whatever it is, it will be quite safe," said Edward.

"It is not mine; I am taking care of it," said Rath. "Why should he have it? Will it be quite safe?"

"Quite—quite," replied Edward.

Rath ripped up the lining of his coat, and taking out the small tin case, placed it on the policeman's desk.

"It is sealed," he said; "the seal must not be broken."

"What is it?" asked the superintendent.

"I don't know," replied Rath.

Mr. Locke looked at him very gravely.

"That sounds strange," he said. "You do not know the contents of this case you take so much care of?"

Edward looked at the box with astonishment. What was this secret of Rath's, this secret which he had concealed from the man who had been his constant and only companion for so many weeks?

"There is no need to open it for the present, Mr. Locke?" he asked, earnestly.

Mr. Locke considered for a moment.

"It might throw some light on this affair, Mr. Bryan. But I will hand it, sealed as it is, to the magistrates."

He conducted them to a cell, and Edward begged permission to remain with his friend, for a short time, at any rate.

The turning of the key and the run of the bolts affected him more than they did Rath, who sat down with a gesture of weariness, but no trace of despair or even fear.

"I'm causing you a great deal of trouble, Edward," he said. "You came to the wood in search of me? You have left your people, have left your newly-found happiness. Tell me about it. It was strange that you should meet her so soon."

Edward, from whose mind the tragedy had driven, for the time, the sense of his own great disappointment and grief, returned to the full misery of it.

"The luck has gone against both of us, Rath," he said, with a bitter laugh. "While I have been making my fortune, I have been losing the woman I loved. She has"—his voice broke—"she has jilted me, left me for someone else. She has broken her promise, and is going to marry another man."

"Then she is not worthy of your love," said Rath, with his simple and stern philosophy.

Edward reddened.

"No, no; don't say that, Rath. I could not bear to say it to myself. She is the best, the truest—oh, what am I saying! And yet I cannot help feeling it, though—though she has broken faith with me. If you knew her you would be as loath to doubt her, to condemn her, as I am. But we won't talk of my misfortune, old fellow; this trouble of yours is far worse, far more serious."

Rath shook his head.

"They will find the man who did it," he said, with quiet assurance. "I am not afraid. I don't understand why they have taken me, why they don't believe me; but it does not matter. I shall be free in a little while. And now you go

back to your people, Edward, and don't be anxious about me."

Edward looked round the cell reluctantly. That Rath, the noblest character Edward had ever met, should be charged with the awful crime of murder, and left thus in a prison cell, was almost unendurable. But Rath held out his hand, shook Edward's, smiling gravely, and flung himself on the pallet, remarking:

"I am very tired; I shall be asleep in five minutes."

He sat up again as Edward slowly and reluctantly went towards the door.

"That tin case, Edward? It will be safe, he will not open it?"

"No; rest easy on that point, Rath. Whatever it is it will be quite safe."

He waited for a moment to see if Rath wanted to tell him anything about the case; but he did not, and Edward still waited, until Rath's regular and steady breathing proclaimed him asleep, before summoning the jailer to open the door.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

RALPH sped through the wood, crouching instinctively and —already!—with the crouching attitude and furtive side glances of the criminal escaping from the scene of his crime. He reached the Hall, and, bending still lower, entered by the window of the den. There he paused and pantingly waited and listened. The house was perfectly quiet, and its quietude stilled his palpitating nerves. He went to the sideboard and got some brandy, and though the spirit seemed like water to his taste, it lent him a spurious courage, and after a moment or two he stole cautiously up to his bedroom, and pacing up and down softly, tried to realise his position. At first the horror of his crime held complete possession of his mind.

He was a murderer! He had killed a fellow-creature, and he would assuredly have to pay the penalty. He, Ralph, the Earl of Ratton, master of Ratton Hall, would be hanged, would be hanged as if he were no better than a labourer or tramp who had committed a murder in a drunken fit.

He shook all over, and the sweat poured out upon him—a cold sweat that struck like ice. To be hanged! It was too hideous, too—too absurd! He must be dreaming, must have drunk too much and be suffering from one of the hallucinations of delirium tremens. Yes, that was it; he assured himself, and tried to laugh; but the laugh died in his throat as

he looked round the room and saw Nita's dead face floating in every part of it, in whatever direction his blood-shot eyes rested.

Then came another phase of feeling. The human being he had killed was Nita. Nita, his wife, was dead. She was dead and he was free. Free! That is, he would be free to marry Lady Mary if—if—his guilt remained undiscovered.

If! "There is much virtue in an 'if.'" With the cunning of a criminal whose brain is fighting for his life, he forced himself to confront all the circumstances. No one had seen him leave the house, no one had seen his meeting with her. No one had seen the dastardly, fiendish blows which he had struck her. How could the crime be traced to his hand? Why, the very knife with which he had done the awful deed was not his—had only been in his possession a few minutes. Whose was it? Surely, if it were found, suspicion would attach to its owner?

Then suddenly his eyes fell upon the red stains, scarcely dry, on his coat-sleeve and shirt-cuff. He shuddered, and tore the shirt and coat off him. They were the only damning evidence against him, and he must get rid of them. But where? He looked round with feverish eagerness; but a modern room furnished with every obvious luxury offers few hiding-places which would be secure from a detective's eye. Besides, if he disposed of them, however cleverly, Parkins his valet would miss them, would be curious, suspicious. He could not hide the clothes; he must remove the stains. With trembling hands he sponged away the damning spots, and placed the shirt and the coat under the coverlid of the bed to dry. The sponge he tore in pieces and burnt in the fire, which was still alight. Then he undressed and crept into bed. Like Macbeth, he had effectually murdered sleep; but he closed his eyes and tried to still his tortured and torturing nerves, and, of course, the moment he shut his eyes, the panorama of his crime unrolled itself before his mental vision.

He saw it all as plainly as if he were re-enacting the horrid tragedy; but though fear throbbed in every vein of his body, there was no pity, no remorse in his heart. He had hated the unfortunate woman to whom he was tied; he hated her still, even now that she was dead. She had stood between him and his desires; she had been the barrier between him and his social ambition; he had cut and slashed this barrier down with the knife with which he had hacked out her life, and he felt no remorse.

He lay awake going over the murder again and again, and

listening intently. Would some gamekeeper, poacher, find the body, and would they come up to the Hall with the tidings?

While he was asking himself the question, he heard a ring at the bell. His heart leapt, then sank heavy as lead, and he shook in every limb as he heard voices in the hall, and presently the sound of Parkins's footsteps descending the stairs. He listened with ears that seemed preternaturally capable of detecting every sound. The voices died away, Parkins ascended the stairs, and all was quiet again.

Had they found the body already?

The dawn came—a cold winter dawn which struck a chill to his very soul as he saw the light from the shrouded window. If his guilt were discovered, how many, or, rather, how few, such dawns would he see?

The inaction of lying there and waiting, waiting for something to happen, became well-nigh intolerable to him; but some instinct warned him to remain quiet, and after he had taken the shirt and coat—now quite dry—from under the coverlid and thrown them on a chair, he got into bed again and renewed the agony of suspense.

Parkins usually called him at nine; but it was barely half past eight when the valet knocked at the door. Ralph made no answer, and simulated sleep, and Parkins entered softly and quietly began to collect the clothes and arrange the shaving things. At last, unable to remain quiescent any longer, Ralph opened his eyes and yawned.

"What time is it, Parkins?" he said.

"Half past eight, my lord," replied Parkins in a subdued voice.

"What the devil did you wake me so early for?" demanded Ralph, angrily, but wondering whether the dread that shook him was discernible in his voice. "I must have had too many cigars last night, Parkins, for I've got a deuce of a head on this morning," he added; and he turned over with the groan and yawn which emanates from the man who has "indulged" overnight.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, my lord," said Parkins. "I am rather earlier than usual; but—but something has happened, and—and I was half a mind to call your lordship up in the night."

"Something happened? What is it?" asked Ralph, without turning.

"There's been an accident—no, my lord; it's a murder—

in the wood," replied Parkins, standing beside the bed with the very coat in his hands which Ralph had worn.

Ralph turned and sat up.

"What?" he demanded. "Murder! What are you talking about? Ah! poachers, I suppose? Is it one of the gamekeepers? I knew there would be trouble with those d——d poachers sooner or later."

Parkins, pale and excited, shook his head.

"It isn't a gamekeeper, my lord; it's—it's a woman, poor soul!"

"A woman!" echoed Ralph, sitting up and staring in front of him with blood-shot eyes and gaping mouth; with the expression of a man awakened, by awful news, from a drunken sleep.

"Yes, my lord," replied Parkins, who saw nothing extraordinary, considering the circumstances, in his master's appearance. "The poor creature had been stabbed—ever so many times, Grey, the keeper, says, and was quite dead."

"Who—who was it? What was she doing in the wood?" asked Ralph, feeling as if his parched tongue were too thick for his mouth.

"Don't know, my lord; nobody knows. At least, they didn't when they brought the news. Grey and some of the other men came straight up here thinking you ought to know."

"Why didn't you wake me—tell me? I might have been of some use," said Ralph, with a fine show of impatience and rebuke.

Parkins hesitated for a moment, then he said, evasively:

"I knew your lordship was—tired when you went to bed last night, and, thinking that you couldn't do anything at that hour, I ventured to leave your lordship undisturbed."

Ralph nodded and drew an inaudible breath of relief. He was quick to seize the point and emphasise it.

"Yes, I understand. I—well, I'm afraid I drank too much last night, Parkins. I can't stand much liquor, and I'd rather more than my allowance. Perhaps you noticed it?"

"Yes, my lord," admitted Parkins, with respectful reluctance; "that was why I did not disturb you."

"Very thoughtful of you," said Ralph. "Yes, I fell asleep the moment I got into bed, directly after I left you, you remember?"

"Yes, my lord."

"And I've been asleep ever since until you woke me. I was asleep when you came in, wasn't I?"

"Yes, my lord."

"All the same, I wish you had woke me when the men came; I might have rendered some assistance in finding the scoundrel who—who did it."

"Yes, my lord; but there was not any need. They have got the man."

Ralph started.

"What!" he exclaimed, with an amazement which seemed natural and reasonable enough to Parkins. "They—they have found him?"

"Yes, my lord. A man named Workley—the man who has been up at the Hall lately, my lord, you may remember?—found the man standing beside the body—bending over it, Grey says—and he was caught red-handed, as you may say, my lord. They even found the knife he did it with. He owned the knife—taken off his guard, as you may say, my lord."

Ralph stared before him, his brain hot and whirling. Luck, Fate, Chance, were all crowding to his aid!

"This—this is the most extraordinary story, Parkins!" he said, hoarsely. "What—what is the man's name? Who is he?"

"I don't know his name, my lord. Grey didn't catch it; but he's a friend of Mr. Edward's—Mr. Edward Bryan's, my lord."

Ralph started and put his hand to his brow.

"What the devil are you talking about?" he demanded. "Why do you bring Mr. Bryan's name into it? What has he got to do with it?"

"Mr. Bryan was there, my lord, in the wood last night; he came up just as Mr. Workley and the keepers were getting hold of the murderer, and Mr. Bryan said that he was a friend of his; and, indeed, he said as he would be responsible for him."

Ralph got out of bed, but staggered so much that Parkins caught him by the elbow and supported him.

"I—I must have been very bad last night, Parkins," said Ralph, holding his head with his hands. "I shall have to cut whiskey. I am as giddy as an owl! Is my bath ready? Get me dressed as soon as possible. I ought not to be as bad as this, for I've slept all through the night. What time did I go to bed? Do you remember?"

He looked sharply at Parkins; and Parkins, after a moment's consideration, replied:

"A little after ten, my lord."

Ralph nodded.

"I thought so. A little—after—ten."

He paused between the words, and emphasised them on the man's memory.

Parkins helped him into a dressing-gown, and Ralph went and had his bath. His head, every nerve, ached when he came out of the bath; but his brain was clear enough to appreciate the points in his favour. Parkins could swear, if need be, that his master went to bed drunk at a little after ten, and that he had awakened him from a heavy sleep in the morning.

When he had dressed, Ralph went down to breakfast. He would have given a thousand pounds to have been capable of eating a hearty meal; but every morsel he put in his hot mouth seemed dry and impossible to swallow. He drank a couple of cups of strong tea, and with a nerveless hand turned over his papers and letters. As he was doing so, a footman came into the room.

"Lord Hatherley, my lord."

"Oh, show him in!" said Ralph, bracing himself up for the coming ordeal.

Lord Hatherley entered, limping slightly, and leaning on a stick. He was pale and agitated, and he broke out with:

"You have heard the—the news, Ralph?"

Ralph nodded and pointed to a chair.

"Yes; you have, too? And—and Mary?"

"Not Mary. She knows nothing yet. It is terrible—dreadful! Nothing so dreadful, so horrible, has hitherto happened to us! I came over at once to—to confer with you."

"With me?" said Ralph, in a wooden way.

"Yes. The deed was committed in your wood, within sound of the Hall, so to speak; and you are a magistrate, you know."

Ralph nodded, and he fidgeted with the letters beside his plate.

Lord Hatherley had sunk into a chair and leant his head upon his hands.

"I am dreadfully upset. I am not well or strong, Ralph, and this—this awful business has completely knocked me over. Poor woman—poor woman! You know who she is, I suppose?"

Ralph shook his head. He could not speak; the things on

the table danced before his eyes; he saw Lord Hatherley through a mist.

"She is an actress, a music-hall *artiste*—one of the company which has been performing at Market Ratton," said Lord Hatherley. "Her name—the name she went by professionally—is Nita."

Ralph took up his coffee-cup with a shaking hand, and the cup fell and broke.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "I'm—I'm rather shaky this morning. The fact is, I took a glass or two too much last night. I can't stand much liquor. I'm a bad 'drinkist,' you know."

Lord Hatherley nodded sadly.

"Yes; I've—I've noticed it. You—you must be more careful, Ralph. Better give it up altogether."

"I will—I will!" said Ralph, meekly. "What do you say the name was—Nita? I've never heard of her, and I've knocked about town, too."

"Beyond her name, I've heard nothing about her," said Lord Hatherley; "but, of course, everything will be known. You have heard that they have made an arrest?"

Ralph nodded.

"The strangest, most extraordinary thing! They have arrested a man, a friend of Edward Bryan's, who came to England with him only yesterday."

"Birds of a feather!" said Ralph, with a sneer.

Lord Hatherley flushed hotly.

"Why do you say that, Ralph? I have never heard a word against Edward Bryan in my life. He is an honest, honourable young fellow, the son of a neighbour."

"But his intimate friend and companion commits a murder," said Ralph, with another sneer.

Lord Hatherley rose from his chair, but sank down again.

"That's—that's unfair, ungenerous!" he said. "Edward Bryan's conduct has not been called in question. He came upon the scene after the murder had been committed, and knows nothing about it; but I am convinced, if you knew Edward as well as I do, you would not have made that remark."

"Perhaps not," said Ralph. "I only know that Edward Bryan is an adventurer, and that adventurers are not careful in their choice of companions. I did not know he was back. How is Lady Mary?"

"Mary is ill, I am sorry to say," said Lord Hatherley, *sadly*. "I am afraid she caught a chill waiting for me at the

station last night. I lost my train, and she came to meet me. But I can only think of this dreadful tragedy; and, Ralph, I—I hope you have not expressed your opinion before the servants. You are a magistrate, you know, and you and I, and our fellow-magistrates, will have to examine the accused."

"He'll get short shrift from me," said Ralph, with a bravado which his white face and bloodshot eyes seriously discounted. "I've been told that he was found bending over the body, that he admitted that the knife—blood-stained—was his—"

"Yes—yes! But where is the motive? I'm informed that the young man only arrived in Ratton with Edward Bryan last evening."

Ralph rose, dropping his serviette and nearly overturning his chair.

"What's that got to do with it?" he demanded, impatiently. "The evidence—the *evidence,* points to his guilt, and it's the evidence you and I and the other magistrates have to consider. When does the examination take place?"

"To-morrow morning," replied Lord Hatherley, with a sigh. "It is the first case of murder I have had to consider, and—and I don't like it. As you say, the evidence is against the accused, and yet— How did he come to be in the wood, and why did he murder, in the cruellest of ways, a woman whom he could not have known?"

Ralph shrugged his shoulders. It seemed to him that luck was flowing his way. With Parkins to swear an *alibi,* with evidence to prove that this unknown man was not only found near the body, but had admitted the ownership of the knife, he—Ralph—was safe.

"That's for a jury to decide," he said, with an assumed indifference. "What you and I and the other magistrates have to do is our duty. Can I see Mary if I come over?"

He put the question as casually as he could, but his voice quavered somewhat.

Lord Hatherley shook his head.

"She is keeping to her own room, Ralph, and I don't think she is well enough to see you."

Ralph nodded.

"All right," he said. "But just tell her that I am sure this fellow who has been arrested is guilty, and that I'll see justice is done."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

STELLA slept badly on the night of the murder. Her foot was less painful—thanks to poor Nita's care—but she was restless and feverish, and her snatches of sleep were disturbed by dreams. She dreamt of Rath and of Lord Lisle, fancied that she was once again drifting in the boat that was bearing her away from the island, and that she could see Rath standing on the shore with outstretched hands, and heard his voice calling to her in accents of despair.

She was awakened from one of these dreams by a knocking at the door, and thinking it was Nita, she called "Come in!" and, to her surprise, the landlady entered. The woman seemed in a great state of agitation, and stood beside the bed as if she were scarcely capable of speech.

"What is the matter, Mrs. Sewell? Is it time to get up?" Stella asked, sitting up in the bed and pushing the hair from her face, flushed with sleep.

"No, miss—that is—it's early; but— Oh, miss! I couldn't keep away from telling you any longer! Something dreadful has happened. Poor Madame Nita—"

Stella sprang out of bed, her injured foot quite forgotten.

"Oh, what is it? Is she ill? Let me go to her!" and she snatched at her clothes. The landlady fought with her agitation.

"Go to her, miss! Oh, dear, dear! Don't be frightened, miss. I meant to break it to you, but I don't know how!"

"What is it?" asked Stella, proceeding hurriedly with her dressing. "Is she ill—very ill? Whatever it is, I must go to her. Oh, I am so sorry! Oh, please tell me at once!"—for the landlady had burst into tears.

"She's—she's dead, miss!" she sobbed.

Stella went white, and staggered.

"Dead! Oh, you cannot mean it! She was quite well last night when she went to the theatre. Dead!"

"Yes, miss. And that ain't the worst. The poor thing came by her death unfairly. She—she was murdered last night!"

Stella struggled against the shock and the deathly faintness it caused, and sank on to the bed, her hands clasped tightly. It was so hard to realise that the woman who had been so good to her; whom she had seen only a few hours ago in full possession of health and strength, should be dead!

"Tell me—" she began, chokingly. "Oh, poor woman! Murdered! Oh, there must be some mistake—some cruel mistake! She cannot—*cannot* be dead!"

"It's true, miss. The police have been here already."

"The police?"

"Yes, miss. They've searched the rooms, and one of 'em's in the sitting-room now; and I—I couldn't help coming to you."

"Help me—help me dress," said Stella, brokenly, for her hands shook so that she could not hold her clothes. "When—where?"

"It was last night, in Ratton Wood," said the landlady in a hushed voice. "Don't take on so, miss"—for Stella was crying bitterly. "The poor soul's at rest, anyway; and I don't think she was happy, for all her being so famous and celebrated. She's at rest and out of her troubles, whatever they were. She was murdered in Ratton Wood—stabbed to death. It was a man, and they've got him, the brute, thank God!"

"But—but who—why did he do it?" asked Stella, with horror in her face and voice.

The landlady shook her head.

"The police wouldn't answer any questions; but I hear from the talk that's going round that he's a stranger. But, of course, he must have known madame. You see, miss, ladies in her profession lead strange kind of lives, and know all sorts of people, and you can't tell what mystery was connected with her."

Instantly there flashed across Stella's mind the story Nita had told her of her husband, the man who had deserted her, the man whom Nita had thought she had seen from the window two days ago; but Stella said nothing, and Mrs. Sewell went on:

"There's a policeman in clothes, a detective, miss, and another gentleman—a Mr. Workley—in the sitting-room, and they want to see you."

"To see me?" said Stella, shrinkingly; then she said, quietly: "I will come at once; please tell them. Where—where—"

She could not finish her sentence, but Mrs. Sewell understood, and replied in a hushed voice:

"At the inn, in Ratton village. I'll go and tell them you're coming, miss."

Stella finished dressing and went into the sitting-room. Workley and the detective who had just arrived from the

county town were standing by the table upon which were the contents of some of Nita's travelling-boxes and a small heap of letters and other belongings of hers. Workley's face was white to the lips, his eyes glistened with a fierce and dogged determination; and both men scanned her sharply and keenly.

"This is the young lady who has been lodging with madame," said the landlady, nervously.

The detective bowed and drew a chair forward, but Stella stood, gripping the edge of the table with her hand.

"Sorry to disturb you so early, miss," said the detective. "You've heard the news—very dreadful news!—and I'm sure you will be ready to help us with any information regarding the deceased. Will you tell me your name?"

Stella told him.

"Will you tell me what you know of the deceased? I ought to say that this gentleman, Mr. Workley, is deeply interested—"

Stella looked at Workley with pity and commiseration in her beautiful eyes, and Workley bowed his head for a moment.

—"And he will be grateful to you if you can help us clear up this mystery."

"I know—she told me," faltered Stella.

Workley made a gesture with his hand.

"I—I loved her," he said, huskily. "She was married, I know, but her husband deserted her. I did not know whether he was alive or dead—I was trying to find out. If she had been free—I—we should have married—"

His voice broke and he turned his head away.

Stella's eyes were full of tears as she said:

"I know so little—except that she was good and tender-hearted—" She struggled for composure. "She found me ill and helpless in the street outside here, and brought me in and cared for me as if she had been my sister. She told me something of her life, that she was married, and that her husband had left her, and that Mr. Workley—"

The detective nodded.

"Had she any visitors, Miss Mordaunt?"

"No," said Stella; "I saw no one, and I was here all the time. I had hurt my foot and could not go out. No; no one came to see her."

"Did you notice anything in her conduct that could help us?" asked the detective. "Won't you sit down, Miss Mordaunt? This is very painful for you."

Stella struggled with her emotion.

"I cannot think! I am confused," she said, piteously. "No; I don't remember—except that she was out very late the night before last, and that when she came into my room she seemed very tired and sad."

The detective nodded and made a note.

"Did she say where she had been—whether she had met anyone?"

Stella shook her head.

"Do you think she went to meet anyone?"

Stella hesitated.

"I do not know. That afternoon she—she thought she saw her husband in the street. She was standing by the window and called out; but—but she was not certain it was he."

Workley started and looked at the detective keenly.

"Did you see him, miss—the man she thought was her husband?"

"No," said Stella.

"It's plain enough," exclaimed Workley, hoarsely. "It was her husband. She must have found the villain and met him that night, and he enticed her into meeting him again, and—oh, it is plain enough, the scoundrel!"

Stella sank into the chair and covered her face with her hands.

"I think you're wrong in your surmise, Mr. Workley," said the detective. "The prisoner only arrived in Ratton yesterday evening."

"So they say," said Workley, doggedly; "but it's her husband, right enough."

"Is that all you can tell us, miss?" asked the detective.

Stella inclined her head.

"Thank you. May I ask you to tell no one what you have told us, until the examination to-morrow. I am afraid we shall have to trouble you to attend. Will you remain here—in this house?"

"Yes," faltered Stella. Where else could she go?

"Quite so. I think, if I might make a suggestion, that I wouldn't see anyone until after the examination. People are so curious, and will bother you with questions."

"I will see no one," said Stella. "But may I not go to—to her?"

The detective shook his head.

"I don't—think—I would, miss. She—she was badly hurt, and— No, miss; I understand what you feel; but I think you'd like to remember her as you saw her last."

Stella shuddered and wept, and the detective held open the door for her to go out.

"There's a mystery here, Mr. Workley," he said, when they were alone. "It's not quite so plain a case as you think. Try to prove that the deceased went to meet the man who killed her, *two* nights ago—that is, before last night—and you'll prove the prisoner's innocence; for, mark you, Mr. Bryan's evidence, that he and the prisoner only arrived yesterday evening, is not to be shaken."

Workley shook his hands with a gesture of impatience.

"It was her husband, and she saw him from the window right enough," he said, doggedly.

"What was her married name?" asked the detective.

"I don't know," replied Workley. "I've always known her as Madame Nita. She was always called so."

"The question is, where are her marriage lines—her certificate? It is not here."

"On—on the body?"

The detective shook his head.

"Not very likely if she went to meet him," he said. "She'd be afraid of his getting it from her—that is, if he was the bad lot you think him."

"He deserted her—the villain!"

"Oh, well, every man who leaves his wife isn't altogether bad," remarked the detective, philosophically. "To tell you the truth, Mr. Workley, I don't see the motive for the murder. She was a good-looking woman, a woman most men would be proud of, and she was earning a very large salary. Unless he had some reason for getting rid of her, unless she was in his way, and he wanted to marry again, *had* married again, say—"

Mr. Workley made a gesture of impatience.

"All these theories don't shake me, Mr. Green," he said, grimly. "You forget that I saw him standing over the body, that the knife was found, and that he owned it."

"I know—I know," said the detective, thoughtfully. "It looks black enough against the man we've got, but, all the same, I doubt his being her husband."

"And I don't, and I'll see him hanged!" said poor Workley; and, as if he could bear the strain no longer, he hurried from the room.

* * * * * * *

Edward had gone home from the prison to find the whole family at the Court in a state of excitement and consternation; and for the remainder of that never-to-be-forgotten

night he was surrounded by an eager and awed group, listening to the story of his life with Rath, and the tragedy which had enmeshed him in so sudden and awful a manner. They heard with amazement of the vast wealth of which he had so strangely become possessed; but the fact was almost lost sight of and weighed very little against the news of the terrible crime which he had to tell them.

Even the fact that Edward had returned to find Mary faithless was scarcely remembered in the excitement, the absorbing interest of the murder in the wood.

"You are convinced that he is innocent, Edward?" asked his father, as, weary and well-nigh exhausted, Edward paused in his recital.

"Quite, quite! As convinced as that I myself am innocent; and you would not doubt it if you knew him, sir. Think! He had only come to England with me—had only been in Ratton a few hours. It was impossible that he should know this poor woman, that he should know anything whatever of her. To suppose him guilty would be to suppose Rath Rayne capable of a fiendish, a brutal crime. Rath!" He laughed in grim derision of the idea. "The bravest, gentlest fellow you can imagine! Why, he would lay down his life for the meanest of God's creatures, would risk it a hundred times over to save a woman—dog—from a blow. And to think for one moment that he—of all men—could stab a helpless woman to death. Oh!—well, sir, I can say no more. I know that he was found near the body, that the knife—"

Sir Gilbert nodded gravely.

"Yes, I know. The knife was discovered close at hand; it was stained with blood—forgive me for going over it all again—that he admitted that it was his. Admitted! He *claimed* it, demanded it of them! Do you think he could have done that if he had been guilty?"

Sir Gilbert shook his head.

"No one can tell what a man may do under the circumstances," he said, with the wisdom of age and experience. "There is only one thing for you to do, Edward, and that is to get legal advice as soon as possible. Your friend did not commit the murder, but someone else did, and the quickest way of clearing Mr. Rayne is to find the guilty man. Go to Bulpit to-morrow morning—it is morning now. Go to bed, all of you, and leave Edward and me to do what we can."

A word of Edward's ruined hopes was spoken by Sir Gilbert.

"Your mother has told me, my boy. I'm sorry. You know that."

Edward wrung his father's hand.

"Thank you, sir," he said, sadly. "In this terrible trouble of poor Rayne's I have not had time to suffer—as I shall presently. Mary has chosen her own path; she was free to do so, quite free. There was no engagement. I—I hope she will be happy. I could have borne it better if the man had been someone else, someone more worthy of her. But no doubt I'm prejudiced against Lord Ratton; it would only be natural, wouldn't it?"

Sir Gilbert sighed.

"I can't say that I myself am very fond of him," he said; "but there must be prejudice on my part also, seeing that he has come between you and your happiness, Edward. He—well, he is not a gentleman, and lately he has taken to drinking, I'm told. I myself have seen him, after a run, and at a bachelor party, rather the worse for liquor."

"Poor Mary! Why—why has she given herself to him!" exclaimed Edward, hoarsely.

Sir Gilbert shook his head.

"Women, the best and the worst of them, are a mystery, my boy. But one cannot help asking your question. He has rank and wealth; but Mary Hatherley is the last to sell herself for either—at least, one would think so."

"It is a mystery," said Edward, despairingly. "Don't let us say any more about it, sir. I've got to fight it, to face the music, and—and I want to do so without whining, if I can. I've a noble example in poor Rath. He has had to bear grief as hard as mine, and he has borne, still bears it, like a man."

Edward snatched a hasty breakfast, and rode into Market Ratton to see Mr. Bulpit.

As always happens in such emergencies, every little accident was against him. Mr. Bulpit had gone to London on the afternoon of the preceding day, said the old clerk.

"For God's sake, wire to him, and ask him to come back!" said Edward. "I want his help for my friend, Mr. Rayne."

From Mr. Bulpit's he went to the prison, and found Rath pacing up and down. His manner was grave but quite calm, and still absolutely free from any trace of apprehension.

"Have you slept—are you well—my poor Rath?" exclaimed Edward, as he wrung his hand.

"Yes, I slept all night. I am quite well," replied Rath, quietly. "Have they found the man?"

"No," said Edward, reluctantly; "but everything is being done—"

"Thanks; yes, I know that; but I want to get out of here," said Rath. "I cannot look for Stella if I am shut up here, and I want to search for her; it is the only thing I want to do. If I cannot find her"—his voice broke, but he steadied it—"I will go back to the island. You know that, Edward. If—if she is lost to me, I would rather live alone there, where I can think of her, where we were so happy—"

What could Edward say in the face of Rath's almost appalling unconsciousness of his peril?

"We will find her, Rath," he said, "and—and you shall be free presently to make the search. I have sent for our lawyer, and he will take the case in hand and prove your innocence."

Rath nodded.

"Yes," he said, calmly. "He will find the man who did it. If we were on the island, the Indians would find him quickly enough. They can track anything; I've seen them at work."

"We have persons who can hunt a man down," said Edward, "and they will be employed. Is there anything I can do, anything I can get you, Rath?" he asked, looking round his cell, for the turnkey came to inform him that his time was up.

Rath replied in the negative.

"No. Get me out as soon as you can. There is scarcely room to breathe"—he stretched his long arms and smiled gravely—"and certainly not room to walk about. I get to one wall almost before I have left the other, and I'm not used to such close quarters."

Edward spent the remainder of the day in the town, obtaining all the information he could about the murdered woman, while he waited impatiently for Mr. Bulpit's return. The information he acquired was only similar to that of which the general public was possessed, and threw no light whatever on the tragedy. The night closed, and Mr. Bulpit did not return. Edward was in a fever. The next morning a telegram came, saying that Mr. Bulpit would reach Market Ratton by the eleven-o'clock train. Edward posted down to the station with a pair of his father's best horses, for the examination was fixed for twelve, and Mr. Bulpit would barely have time to reach the court before it commenced. He almost tore the old lawyer out of the train and hurried him into the phaeton. Mr. Bulpit had read a half account of the crime

in the London evening paper, and he listened to Edward's recital of the details. He was much astonished at Edward's dramatic meeting with Rath and their mutual adventures, and said a word or two of congratulation, but Edward waved them aside sadly.

"All the gold in the world would be of no use to me now, Mr. Bulpit," he said. "No doubt you know why—"

The old lawyer inclined his head.

"It is a pity you did not come earlier," he said, in his laconic way.

"It is a pity we came to England at all," retorted Edward, bitterly. "I have only come back to disappointment and the ruin of my life's happiness, and my poor friend has come to find himself unjustly accused of a ghastly crime."

"Of which we have to prove him innocent; no easy task, Mr. Edward," said Mr. Bulpit. "I should like to see him before he goes before the magistrates, but there is only time to reach the court."

"And he could tell you nothing more than I have told you," said Edward, as they rushed along. "It is difficult for you to realise how—how unsophisticated he is. He doesn't appreciate his peril; he knows nothing of the world and the terrible ease with which we can make an innocent man seem guilty. It is sufficient for him that he did not commit the deed, and he is free from the least fear or dread of the result. All this is difficult for you to understand; but remember that he has been living alone, away from civilisation—"

"Half a savage," said Mr. Bulpit, thoughtfully.

Edward laughed indignantly.

"Nothing of the kind," he said, warmly. "He is a gentleman in manner and voice and—and conduct. That's the strangest phase of his personality. When you see him you will find it hard to believe that the greater part of his life has been spent in absolute isolation."

"What is his name, did you say?" asked Mr. Bulpit.

"Rayne—Rath Rayne."

Mr. Bulpit murmured it several times.

"I've a kind of notion that I've heard it before; but I may be mistaken. It is a strange story—well-nigh incredible, as you say. And you and he are millionaires, Mr. Edward?"

"About that," replied Edward, moodily. "But money will not help either of us, as I said. What a crowd! Whoa! whoa!"

He had to check the horses, for the High Street was

thronged with people, standing and moving about with that air of curiosity which proclaims that something far and away beyond the ordinary is happening. The mob parted, and made a lane for them to pass through, but pressed after them; and Edward pulled up the steaming horses at the court-house door.

For nearly four hours the excitement had been fermenting, and a spirit of feverish unrest had agitated Market Ratton; it reached a head as the crowd fought its way into the pokey and inconvenient court, which was too small to hold a tenth of the people clamouring for admission.

CHAPTER XL.

To Ralph the hours passed in a kind of demoniac dance, treading on his guilty soul "with burning feet." Everybody about him was thinking and talking of nothing but the murder in the wood, and he had to listen and join in the conversation with an assumption of grave regret, and yet with that ease which belongs to a clear conscience. He kept to his den as much as he could the day before the examination, and scores of times he found himself wandering to the sideboard in search of the drunkard's consolation; but he had to restrain himself. He knew that a chance word might betray him, and he could not trust himself when the drink was in him.

This effort at self-restraint increased the horror and dread of his situation, and once or twice he felt as if he were breaking down under the awful weight which pressed upon him; but he encouraged himself by mentally going over the evidence against the suspected man, and assuring himself that it was more than sufficient to convict him.

In the course of the day he walked over to Hatherley, but he did not see Mary. She was too ill to leave her room. Ralph was relieved by her enforced absence, for he shrank from meeting her. He could play his part fairly well before her father and the rest, but he was conscious of a vague dread of Mary's clear eyes.

"What is the matter? Has she seen a doctor?" he asked.

Lord Hatherley shook his head and sighed.

"No. I begged her to let me send for him; but she will not do so; and yet she seems quite prostrated."

"It may only be a cold," said Ralph, absently. "Has—has she heard about this murder?" he asked, his eyes wander-

ing from Lord Hatherley's face and looking beyond him shiftingly.

"No—oh, no!" replied Lord Hatherley. "I have given strict orders that no one is to mention it to her. It would only make her worse."

"Quite right," assented Ralph, eagerly. "Keep it from her as long as you can! It's almost a good thing she can't leave her room, or she'd be pestered to death with this business, like the rest of us. I'm sure I'm sick of the subject! Every man and woman I've met has talked of nothing else."

"That is not surprising," said Lord Hatherley, with a sigh. "No such terrible crime has been perpetrated in this county since I can remember, and it is only natural that it should haunt one's mind to the exclusion of other things."

"I have refused to talk about it," said Ralph, with a fine air of impartiality. "I—I suppose I shall have to sit on the bench to-morrow; I should like to get off it, if I could; and I'm rather seedy."

"You are not looking at all well," said Lord Hatherley, regarding Ralph's pale and haggard face and its still bloodshot eyes, with their dull marks beneath them; "but I think you ought to sit, if you can. We should all like to avoid so painful a duty, of course; but, after all, it is a duty, and we cannot shirk it."

"Just so," said Ralph, reluctantly. "We'll go together; I'll drive over for you. Has—has anything further been discovered?"

"No," replied Lord Hatherley. "Green, the detective, from Watlington, is here, I am told. He is a very clever man, and, no doubt, will make an exhaustive investigation. I hear that he is going to examine the wood—the spot where the murder was committed—this morning."

"Why is he doing that?" asked Ralph, sharply, and with a twitch of the pale and swollen lips. "There is nothing more to be discovered there, I should think."

Lord Hatherley shook his head.

"One would think not; but Green is a man of great experience and knows his business."

"He'll find the evidence against this fellow quite sufficient," remarked Ralph, rising and moving to the window, and back again, restlessly and uncertainly. "We shall have no difficulty in committing the prisoner for trial."

Lord Hatherley frowned. He had sat upon the bench for many years, and had always endeavoured to administer justice fairly and impartially.

"I cannot say," he said. "I always carefully guard against forming an opinion until I have heard the evidence in court."

"Just so—just so!" assented Ralph, hurriedly. "Of course the fellow will get justice. Well, I'll call for you to-morrow morning. Give—give my love to Mary, and tell her how sorry I am that she is ill, and how—how much I miss not seeing her."

On his way back to the Hall he met a quiet-looking man, who was pacing thoughtfully across the avenue; he stopped and raised his hat to Ralph, and Ralph's heart rose to his mouth; for he guessed who the man was.

"My name is Green, my lord," said the detective. "I'm about to examine the ground round the scene of the murder."

"Certainly — certainly!" responded Ralph, promptly. "Terrible business, Mr. Green—terrible! I need scarcely say that if I can render you any assistance, if there is anything anyone at the Hall can do, we are, all of us, at your disposal."

"Thank you, my lord," said Mr. Green.

"I should like to ask you if you have discovered anything fresh; but I shall be on the bench to-morrow, and I don't like to discuss the matter with anyone."

"Quite right and proper feeling, my lord," said Mr. Green. "No, my lord, there is nothing fresh—as yet."

Ralph nodded, and walked on with an impassive face; but the cool, grave "as yet" haunted him.

Was it possible for this sleuth-hound—who looked like a banker's clerk—to discover any clue which should lead him to suspect?

With a shudder, he went straight to his den, and sinking into a chair, wiped the sweat from his brow as he pictured the silent, self-contained man peering and poking about the horrid spot which never for a moment faded from Ralph's mental vision.

He took a sleeping draught that night, and fell into the heavy slumber which a soporific produces, and he woke the next morning with so parched a tongue and such ragged nerves, that he found it absolutely necessary to take some brandy before his pretence of a breakfast.

As his hand shook too much to permit him to drive, he ordered the close carriage.

Lord Hatherley and he drove through the crowd to the court-house just before Edward and Mr. Bulpit, and they went by the side door to the magistrate's room. There was a

very full bench, and the small room was inconveniently crowded.

"This is an awful business, Hatherley," said Lord Parodel. "How do you do, Ratton? Most unfortunate that it should have occurred in your park," he added, as he looked at Ralph's haggard face.

"Oh, yes; very unfortunate, of course," assented Ralph. "Can't get it off my mind!"

Sir Gilbert came up to greet them.

"I shall not sit to-day," he said, gravely. "The prisoner is a friend and partner of my son's, and I think it better to take no part in the examination."

Lord Hatherley, who was the chairman, inclined his head.

"You know best, Bryan," he said. "Is Edward here?"

"He has gone for Mr. Bulpit, who will conduct the defence," replied Sir Gilbert.

Ralph turned quickly.

"Old Bulpit?" he said, with an attempt at a sneer. "What does he know of criminal law? It would have been better for him to keep clear of this, I should have thought."

His fellow-magistrates regarded him with faint surprise; but no one said anything, and Ralph, seeing that he had created an unpleasant impression, hurried on.

"Tremendous lot of people here. Morbid curiosity in the lower orders, eh?"

"Yes; but natural enough. The poor woman had been performing in the town, and was a favourite, and the murder"—Lord Parodel corrected himself quickly—"the affair is so horrible that it is bound to cause a great deal of excitement. I'm told that there are special reporters down for the London papers."

The magistrates' clerk came in to arrange the order of business; for there was the usual number of small and unimportant cases, and then the magistrates filed into the court and took their seats on the bench.

The place was crammed, and the buzz of conversation was with difficulty suppressed by the clerk and the usher's peremptory:

"Silence!"

When the cases of petty larceny and "drunks and disorderlies" were gone into and the small fines imposed, or discharges pronounced, Mr. Bulpit and Edward remained in one of the outer corridors, saying the last few words in comparative quietude.

"I should like to have seen the prisoner—your friend—be-

fore the examination; but it cannot be helped. I shall have plenty of opportunity afterwards. He will be sure to be remanded or committed."

"I'm afraid so," Edward agreed, with a sigh. "Are all the magistrates here?"

"All except Lord Lisle—and here he is—just driven up."

Lisle got out of his dog-cart, and entered the corridor a moment later.

"Bryan!" he exclaimed, in evident agitation. "What on earth is this I hear? I have only just come back from town. It can't be true?"

"That my friend Rayne is charged with murder? Yes, it is. You have heard the account?"

"Yes. It is impossible, incredulous!" said Lisle, quickly. "I haven't been able to understand all the details; but I'll answer for it— Oh, I'm not going to sit on the bench, Mr. Bulpit; so you need not look so shocked. I'm here as a witness, if necessary."

"A witness?" said Bulpit.

"Yes. This gentleman who is accused of this awful and brutal murder saved my life the other night, and I say that he is incapable of such a crime as this."

Edward seized his hand and wrung it.

"Thanks, Lisle!" he said. "I don't know what you are alluding to—oh, I'm not surprised at my ignorance. Rayne is the last man to talk of his own good deeds; but you have come to the right conclusion."

"We had better go in," said Mr. Bulpit; and he led the way with legal calm. It was some time before they could reach the solicitors' seats, the crowd was so dense, and each member so fearful of losing his place; and a murmur rose as Lord Lisle was seen to take a seat beside Edward Bryan instead of on the bench.

The last small case was proceeded with, then the clerk said:

"Bring in the prisoner."

There was a stir, a buzz of curiosity and excitement, and all eyes were turned to the dock. A couple of policemen entered with Rath between them, and the intense silence which followed for a moment, as all eyes scanned him, was succeeded by a murmur of surprise. And in Rath's appearance there was cause for it. No one could possibly look less guilty of a coarse and brutal murder than Rath as he stood, straight as an arrow, his handsome face perfectly calm, his eyes quietly

travelling round the crowded court with an expression of interest and curiosity.

At the moment of Rath's appearance, Mr. Bulpit was bent over his notes. When he looked up, a slight exclamation sprang from his lips. He stared with a half-puzzled frown at the prisoner, and for a moment he seemed overwhelmed by some impression caused by the prisoner's appearance. His was not the only ejaculation of surprise, and many eyes turned from Rath to the haggard face of Ralph, where he sat slightly behind Lord Hatherley.

"Great heavens! what a likeness!" murmured Mr. Bulpit; and he, too, glanced at Ralph and then again at the prisoner. But he recovered his usual composure in a moment, and taking out his snuff-box, slowly took a pinch.

Edward had caught Rath's eye at last, and he nodded affectionately and cheerfully.

"Does he look like a guilty man?" he asked of Mr. Bulpit, in an indignant whisper.

But Mr. Bulpit did not appear to hear him.

"Rayne—Rayne?" he muttered, between his pursed lips.

The clerk read the charge, the superintendent stepped into the witness-box. Just below him was the white, grief-stricken face of Workley, as he sat with bent head and nervously working hands. He had glanced at Ralph as he had entered with the other magistrates, but it had only been a glance, as if he were absorbed by his grief and thirst for vengeance; and his eyes, as they left Ralph's face, went with a vindictive glare to Rath.

The usher called "Silence!" the buzz and hum died out, and every head was thrust forward to catch the superintendent's words.

In the dry, official voice and manner, he said:

"I propose to give evidence of the arrest only, your worships, and to ask for a remand."

Lord Hatherley nodded in concurrence, but Mr. Bulpit rose.

"I appear for the prisoner, my lord, and I oppose the proposal of a remand. My client is innocent, and we court the earliest and fullest investigation."

There was a murmur of surprise at Mr. Bulpit's voice and bearing. Had "the old lawyer" got something up his sleeve, some information of which the police were ignorant?

"Such an objection is unusual, Mr. Bulpit," said Lord Hatherley, suggestively; but Mr. Bulpit bowed obstinately.

"The case has only just reached my hands, my lord; I am desirous of hearing the evidence."

"Very good," said Lord Hatherley, after a whispered conference with his fellow-magistrates. "We cannot refuse your application, Mr. Bulpit."

The superintendent, amidst a breathless silence, stated that the prisoner had been arrested at the police station; and almost before he had finished, Mr. Bulpit asked:

"He surrendered, you mean? He was accompanied by Mr. Bryan here; there was no police, no other person with them?"

"Yes, sir—no, sir, they were alone. I call the doctor, your worships."

The doctor stepped into the box, and gave his evidence with a professional directness. Death was caused by wounds inflicted by a knife.

"In your opinion, how long had the deceased been dead before you saw her?" asked Mr. Bulpit.

As the question was answered, Ralph craned forward, then drew back.

"Not very long—a quarter of an hour. It is impossible to say within a few minutes."

"Could the wounds have been inflicted by the deceased's own hands?"

"No; certainly not. One was made from a position which would have been impossible to the deceased."

Mr. Bulpit nodded, and Workley slowly climbed into the box. For a moment or two he seemed incapable of speech; then, as if with a great effort, he told his story in a hoarse voice, his small eyes fixed on the wall opposite him. Everyone listened with breathless interest, and all eyes turned to Rath, who stood listening with grave intentness.

"The prisoner was bending over the body? Had he it in his arms?"

Workley hesitated.

"Please don't hurry, Mr. Workley," said Mr. Bulpit, in his dry way, but with every possible courtesy. "Search your memory; tell us exactly, minutely what you saw."

"Yes; he had the—the body in his arms," answered Workley, doggedly.

"Supporting it?"

"Yes."

"And now I will ask you to be very careful. Did he offer to run away?"

"No."

"Did you call to him to surrender? You would naturally

exclaim with horror at the awful sight. Did you charge him with the crime, and call upon him to yield himself your prisoner?"

"No. I—do not remember. Can a man remember what he said or did at such a moment?" demanded Workley, hoarsely.

"Not very well," assented Mr. Bulpit. "But I may take it that you sprang upon him at once; any man would do so."

"Yes."

"And he resisted your attack?"

"Yes."

"You were hurt? Yes. Did the gamekeepers who came to your assistance call upon him to surrender himself?"

"No—no; I think not."

"And he resisted them, fought them, in fact, and they were hurt?"

"Yes; he fought as if for his life," said Workley, grimly.

"Quite so. As you would have done if you had been suddenly attacked without, so far as you knew, rhyme or reason?"

"Yes."

"Mr. Workley, you knew the deceased? Did you ever hear her mention the prisoner's name?"

"No, sir."

"Mr. Workley, I beg you to believe that I have every desire to spare your feelings, but—but you were desirous of marrying this unfortunate lady? Is that so?"

"Yes," dropped from Workley's lips.

"But she was married already?"

Lord Hatherley, who had acquired considerable legal knowledge in his long experience as a magistrate, interposed.

"You cannot ask the witness that question, Mr. Bulpit," he said, gravely."

Mr. Bulpit bowed.

"Quite so, my lord." To the witness: "Have you ever met the husband of the deceased?"

"No, never," answered Workley, between his teeth.

Mr. Bulpit dismissed him with a courteous wave of the hand, and a gamekeeper took his place. He gave an account of the discovery of the knife. A shudder ran through the crowd as the weapon was handed up to the magistrates, and a murmur of horror arose as the witness told how Rath had owned the knife.

"He owned it at once; claimed it, in fact, at once, immediately?" asked Mr. Bulpit.

"Yes, sir, at once," was the prompt answer. "He seemed surprised like that we didn't give it to him there and then; in fact, Mr. Bulpit, if us hadn't caught him there red-handed, as you may say, us 'ud have found it hard to believe—"

"That is not evidence," said the clerk, rebukingly.

"Beg pardon, sir, beg pardon, your worships," said the gamekeeper, touching his forehead respectfully. "I thought as Mr. Bulpit wanted to know everything—"

"I do," said Mr. Bulpit, solemnly; and the crowd moved excitedly. "One question: You heard the prisoner ask for the knife; did he search for it in his pocket?"

"Yes, sir; I seed 'un; but he couldn't find it, and one of us—it was William, the second keeper—noticed that the bottom of the pocket—"

"Silence!" from the clerk again.

Back came the doctor to swear to the stains on Rath's coat-sleeve and on the knife; but Mr. Bulpit seemed to attach little importance to this evidence.

"The stains might be caused by the prisoner's holding the body?" he asked.

The doctor assented.

There was a pause, and Mr. Bulpit looked round.

"Is that all the evidence for the prosecution, your worships?" he asked in his dry way. "Will there be any attempt to show my client's—beg pardon—the prisoner's acquaintance, connection, with the deceased, to suggest a motive? I ask that I may know what evidence I have to meet. Is there any proof that the deceased met the prisoner on the fatal night by accident or appointment?"

There was a stir in the court, and the crowd turned towards the door.

Rath himself did not move. He had listened to the witnesses, to Mr. Bulpit's cross-examination, with a strange commingling of emotions, in which surprise predominated.

All these men were trying to prove him guilty. Why? Why had they not searched for and found the man who had done it?

He looked from one magistrate to another gravely, but without fear. Then his eyes met Edward's, and he smiled calmly, as if he were aware of, and appreciated, his friend's sympathy.

The superintendent pushed his way towards the box, followed by a slight. girlish figure, which was at once the target of every eye.

She walked with bent head and clasped hands to the box, and as she went up the steps, Lord Lisle was seen to spring to his feet and heard to utter an exclamation.

It caused Rath to turn towards him, and then to the witness-box. Instantly a cry arose from him, a cry of amazement, of joy.

"Stella!" sprang from his lips.

She started and raised her head, a look of answering amazement and joy shone in her eyes, and she stretched out her hands to him, crying:

"Rath! Rath!"

CHAPTER XLI.

"RATH!"

"Stella!"

With outstretched hands they leant forward and gazed at each other, with wonder and love fighting for mastery in their eyes. If the policeman who guarded him had not laid restraining hands upon him, Rath would have leapt from the dock to her. As it was, he gazed and gazed with flashing, flaming eyes and quivering frame.

And Stella, with heaving bosom and parted lips, kept murmuring his name half unconsciously:

"Rath! Rath!"

Upon the court fell the silence, the stupor of amazement, and that interest which is too intense to be called mere curiosity. The magistrates gazed from one to the other, from the prisoner in the dock to the lovely girl who appeared as a witness against him. The crowd was as still as if turned to stone, its eyes moving from one figure to another, and every person present was asking what it meant.

Edward was as astonished as the rest, and sat gazing first at Rath and then at Stella; and Mr. Bulpit, who had been as startled as the others at the sudden cry—the twin notes of joy and love—was, perhaps, the first to recover his calm.

"Who is she? What does it mean?" he asked abruptly of Edward.

"I don't know! I can't guess; I never saw her before—wait. Yes! Idiot that I am! it is she—the girl of the island."

"What 'she'—what girl?" demanded Mr. Bulpit, still more abruptly.

"The girl he lost—the girl he— Oh, I can't explain—there isn't time. But how is it that she is here—how does

she come here? Look at Lisle. What is the matter with *him?*"

For Lisle had sunk into his seat again, and was leaning his head upon his hand as if he had received a sudden blow.

Mr. Bulpit stared from one to the other, and frowned heavily; his legal mind resented these sudden shocks and surprises, and he looked up at the magistrates as if for guidance.

Meanwhile, Stella had realised that though Rath was here, he was separated from her, that he was held back by policemen, that he was charged with—murder! And that she was going to bear witness against him! The colour died from her face, and was succeeded by a deep pallor, her arms fell, and she clutched the edge of the box.

"Stella!" cried Rath, as if they were alone—and, indeed, at that moment, to his mind and eyes, hers was the only presence, and the bench of magistrates, the crowd, were "as if they were not." "Stella—speak to me! How did you come here?"

"Silence!" called the usher, recovering from his stupor. "Silence! You must not speak to the witness."

Rath's face flushed ominously, and he looked at the usher with stern anger; but Stella turned with piteous eyes to the line of magistrates.

"He is innocent!" she cried, brokenly. "He is innocent! I did not know that it was he. No one told me! Let me go —let me speak—to him!"

"Silence!" cried the usher again, as if it were the only word of which he were capable; but the clerk, at a sign from Lord Hatherley, went to the witness.

"Be calm," he said to Stella. "You cannot leave the box. You shall speak to the prisoner presently. You have to give your evidence."

Stella swayed slightly and her eyes closed, and Lord Hatherley poured out a glass of water and handed it to the usher, who carried it to Stella; but she waved it aside, and, with a great effort, recovered from the threatened swoon, and stood upright, her eyes fixed on Rath as if they would draw him to her.

The superintendent rose, evidently much discomposed by the sudden diversion from the regular legal procedure.

"Take the Testament; the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God!" mumbled the usher, quickly.

Stella took the oath, her eyes never swerving from Rath's face.

"Your name is?" said the superintendent.

"Stella Mordaunt," answered Stella, mechanically.

"You knew the deceased—Madame Nita? You lived in the same house with her? And saw her the night of her death? Will you tell us how you came to know her?"

In low but clear accents Stella faltered out the account of her meeting with poor Nita; and as she told the story of the murdered woman's tender charity, the crowd murmured sympathetically and glanced at the prisoner darkly. It made his crime, if he were guilty, all the blacker.

"You know that she was married— Beg pardon, your worships. I'll ask if she knew the name of the deceased's husband."

As he put the question, there was a movement on the bench. Ralph had shifted his chair, as if involuntarily, so that he was now almost hidden behind Lord Hatherley.

"No," replied Stella.

"You were present on the Tuesday night when the deceased said she saw her husband from the window?"

"Yes."

"She came home late that same night. Do you know whether she went to meet anyone?"

"No; oh, no; she did not tell me."

"Or that she was going to meet anyone on the night of the murder—on the night of her death?"

"No; she did not tell me. She went to the music-hall as usual," Stella answered, still mechanically, for her whole mind was concerned with Rath.

Why was he standing there? Why had they accused him —him of all men—of this dreadful murder?

"As a rule, she came straight home after the performance?"

"Yes; those were the only two nights— Oh! I know nothing more—nothing!"

As Mr. Bulpit rose, Lord Hatherley said in a low voice:

"Place a chair for the witness."

Rath looked at him with swift gratitude; but Stella would not sit down. The front of the box was nearer Rath, you see.

"You have told us all you know of this terrible business, I am sure, Miss Mordaunt," said Mr. Bulpit, more gently than anyone present had ever heard him speak. "Now I will ask you to tell us all you know of the prisoner. When you entered the box, and first saw him, you called to him by his Christian name, as if you were old friends: that is so?"

"Yes, oh, yes!" panted Stella, clasping her hands, and looking at Rath with love and pity in her beautiful eyes.

"Where did you meet him?"

"On the island."

"On the island? What island?"

"I do not know."

The court listened, amazed.

"You—do—not—know?" slowly from Mr. Bulpit.

"No. Oh! I will tell you. I may, Rath?"

At this ingenuous appeal to the prisoner, all eyes swung to him. He made an assenting movement of his hand.

"We were shipwrecked—my mother and I. And Rath—he came out from the island in a canoe and saved us. He took care of us, worked for us, protected us; if it had not been for his care we should have died." The tears began to gather in her eyes. "He was good to us. Oh! I cannot go on; give me time—a minute."

"Pray be seated," said Lord Hatherley.

"Silence!" cried the usher, as the crowd swayed and murmured with sudden sympathy.

"He gave us shelter and food, and worked day and night for us. Then—my mother died"—her voice broke—"and we were all alone."

The crowd exchanged glances; but not a man nor woman smiled or sneered; for the sweet girlish face and voice were eloquent of innocence and purity.

"And one day I went out in the boat for fish, and a storm arose suddenly and the boat was blown out to sea—away from him." The tears were running down her cheeks, and a woman in the crowd gave a dry sob of excitement and emotion. "I was swept away from the island, and—and thought that I—I should never see him again. And now he is here, and I— No, no; I can go on! I was picked up by a yacht—"

A movement on the part of Lord Lisle drew her eyes to him, and she uttered an exclamation.

"Need I—I say any more? Oh, my lord—gentlemen—he is innocent! You do not know him as well as I do, or you would know that he *could* not do it! Rath kill a woman! If you knew him! He is too good and noble. He would risk his life to save another man's; he has risked his life for me—only to—to gather a few poor flowers. A murderer is a coward: no brave man would kill a woman—and Rath—there is none in all the world more brave!"

All this she had poured out, her hands clasped, her eyes streaming with tears, just as one of the factory girls in the crowd might have pleaded for her lover of whose innocence she was convinced. One touch of nature makes the whole

world kin; and the women in the crowd were crying, mingling their tears with those of this sister of theirs, who, with the courage of love, declared her belief in the man who had saved and befriended her, and demanded his acquittal.

It was all terribly irregular, but not one of the magistrates uttered a protest, and the usher did not utter his parrot-like demand for silence.

"Is this true?" muttered Mr. Bulpit to himself; but Edward heard him. His own eyes were moist, and his voice broken, as he replied, eagerly:

"Yes. Can't you see it is? And it bears out Rath's story. Oh! if I could only go to him, take his hand—"

"Sit still!" growled Mr. Bulpit. "There's more in this than meets the eye."

Then he turned to Stella, who, trembling, stood with her small hands clutching the edge of the box.

"One or two more questions only," he said, more gently even than before. "You were swept away from the island—you have not seen the prisoner since?"

"No, oh, no!" replied Stella, with a sob. "I do not know how he came here—why—"

"Stella!" came from Rath's lips. "When you had gone I—I thought you were dead. Then Edward came, and he gave me hope, and I came with him to find you, if you were alive—"

"Silence! You really must remain silent," said the clerk, sternly.

Rath was about to make retort, with swift anger and indignation; but Mr. Bulpit said, quietly, firmly:

"You must not speak. Say nothing, whatever you hear." To Stella: "Did you ever hear the prisoner mention the name of the deceased? Permit me to ask it, your worships, I beg."

"No," replied Stella, with surprise. "How should he? He had never heard of her. He had been on the island, alone with his father, since he was a child! How should he know her? Tell them, Rath—oh, tell them!"

Mr. Bulpit interposed quickly:

"Miss Mordaunt, we can all make allowance for your feelings; but you must not address the prisoner, and he must not speak yet. Now, my last question: Have you ever heard him speak of his wife?"

At this apparently absurd question, Stella stared. Then a blush rose, for an instant only, to her face.

"Answer, please, no matter how uncalled for my question *may seem*," said Mr. Bulpit.

"No, no—oh, no! He had never seen any woman in his life but my mother and me," she replied, so sweetly, so innocently, that the crowd looked at one another.

"Thank you," said Mr. Bulpit.

A policeman went towards the box to help her down; but Lord Lisle, as if awaking from a stupor, sprang to his feet, pulled the man aside, and held out his hand to her.

"Oh, Lord Lisle!" she panted, "cannot I speak to him for a moment—only a moment?"

Lisle then did a small but noble thing. He drew her arm through his, and feigning to leave the court with her, stopped suddenly and brought her quickly to the front of the prisoner's box. Instantly Rath had bent down with outstretched hands, and Stella had clasped them. No one interposed for a moment as they gazed into each other's eyes; all were too moved, too taken by surprise at Lisle's clever ruse; and when a policeman came forward to part them, Lisle slipped in front of him, and whispered to Stella:

"You must come away. Come, let her go, Rayne!"

Rayne drew his hands from hers.

"Don't cry, don't be frightened, Stella," he said. "You know I did not do it; they will find out presently."

"Silence! silence!" cried the usher, as the crowd began to sway and exclaim with excitement; and Lisle managed to draw her from the court, her eyes lingering on Rath's face to the very last moment. The murmur swelled to a louder sound, but the clerk quelled it. The superintendent rose. The sympathy of the crowd—perhaps also of the Bench—had swung towards the prisoner. It was his duty to see that committal was obtained.

"I call Roger Spade," he said in the official voice; and the innkeeper of Team entered the box. His simple account of Rath's appearance at the inn so soon before the murder, and the incident of the knife, brought back to the court the weight of the evidence against the prisoner.

"Is that the knife?" asked the superintendent. The innkeeper took it and turned it over.

"Yes, it's the knife, sure enough," he said.

Mr. Bulpit was upon him at once.

"Come! There are hundreds of knives like that, Mr. Spade. You may have been mistaken—the prisoner might have taken that one up in mistake for his own. There may be two knives."

Mr. Spade shook his head.

"The one the gentleman took out to eat his pastry with had a piece knocked off the handle—I see'd it; so has this."

"He is quite right," said Rath, simply. "It is my knife—I said so."

Mr. Bulpit turned to him with anger and impatience.

"Hold your tongue, sir!" he said, sharply.

Rath looked at him with indignant surprise.

"The man told the truth. Why—?" he began; and the crowd, staring at him with astonishment, uttered something like applause.

Mr. Bulpit turned to the Bench.

"You appreciate my difficulty, your worships?" he said. "I am defending a man who is not only innocent, but completely fails to understand his position! It is obvious that if I am to fulfil my duty efficiently, I must have an interview with him. I do not ask for—I still oppose—a remand, at present; but I will ask for an adjournment of the court that I may confer with my client."

Lord Hatherley and the other magistrates looked relieved; the strain of so unusually grave a case was telling upon them.

"Certainly, Mr. Bulpit," he said; "the court will adjourn for an hour."

Rath was taken from the dock, some of the people in the court rushed out into the open air to breathe and chatter excitedly, some remained, fearful that they should be unable to re-enter. The Bench rose and filed into the magistrates' room; and Lord Hatherley sank into a chair and wiped his face with his handkerchief, while the rest discussed the case in eager undertones.

"Did you ever hear anything like it?" exclaimed Lord Parodel. "Several times I was wondering whether we were in Ratton Court House or a theatre! Wrecked on an unknown island; saved by a modern Robinson Crusoe; alone with him—for how long?—swept away in a boat; saved by a yacht—and then meets him face to face as a witness against him in a charge of murder!"

"A romance of life!" said the young duke.

"Romance—yes; that's just what I should call it!" said a husky voice; and all turned to where Ralph was leaning against the mantel-shelf. There was a sneer on his lips, his hands were thrust deep in his pockets, and his head was bent forward in a half-sullen, half-contemptuous fashion.

"*You* don't believe her, Lord Ratton?" said Lord Parodel.

Ralph shrugged his shoulders.

"That's strange!" commented Parodel. "To me, every word she uttered had the impress of truth."

"And to me!" exclaimed the duke. "I'd swear to the truth of every word."

Ralph laughed shortly.

"Nothing so convincing as a young and pretty witness," he said, sneeringly. "If she'd been old and ugly—"

"You're right, she's pretty enough—by George, lovely!" broke in Parodel.

"And innocent," said the duke, warmly.

Ralph shrugged his shoulders.

"Who knows?" he said. They looked at him with surprise, and he went on more guardedly: "I mean, is there anyone who knows her, can speak as to her—credibility—respectability? She was found in this—this woman's lodgings—a strolling player—"

"I don't understand you, Ratton," said Parodel. "If that girl—that young lady, for she *is* a lady, as any fool could see—no offense, Ratton!—isn't innocent and trustworthy, then my experience of the world—pretty extensive, more's the pity!—goes for nothing!"

"Well—well!" said Ralph, impatiently. "Admit that it's true—which I don't, if it's all the same to you—how does it help the prisoner? Her evidence isn't in his favour—"

"This proves that the prisoner is not the poor woman's husband, anyhow!" retorted Lord Parodel.

"Gentlemen—gentlemen!" interposed Lord Hatherley, with obvious distress. "Surely we ought not to discuss the evidence—the witnesses—at this point. We should wait until we have to decide on the whole case."

"Certainly. I beg your pardon, Hatherley!" said Lord Parodel, promptly. "It was my fault."

"And mine," said Ralph. "How beastly hot it is in here. I'll step outside and get a breath of fresh air, I think."

Though it was not usual for a magistrate to leave the court in the middle of so serious a case, no one stayed him, and Ralph went out by the magistrates' door. There was a momentary silence after he had gone, then Parodel said:

"What ails Ratton, I wonder? Looks bad, too, doesn't he?"

"He is very much distressed by this awful crime; it was perpetrated in his own wood—quite near the house," said Lord Hatherley, apologetically.

"Quite so!" Parodel said, quickly, as if the explanation accounted for Ralph's appearance and manner, and his anx-

mus against the accused. Then he added in a low voice to the duke: "Did you notice the singular resemblance, duke?"

The duke nodded.

"Yes. It was striking! They are strangely alike; not only in face, but in voice; but I am constrained to admit that the prisoner has the best of it. Now, that's what I call a handsome face, if you like; and he's a model of what a man ought to be in thews and muscle. He must be six feet one or two. I should have liked to see the fight between him and the keeper! Will I have a sandwich and a glass of sherry? Won't I! Feel as if I had had nothing to eat for a month. Thank God we fellows don't get a murder case often!"

As Lisle led Stella from the court to one of the small rooms in the corridor, she turned to him with outstretched hands.

"Lord Lisle, I would ask you to forgive me—"

"I have forgiven you long since, though the only thing I had to forgive was your leaving us," he said. "*That* pained and hurt us! But we won't say another word about it, now or in the future. Indeed, we have all too much on our minds, more grave and serious matters. Sit down! Ah, yes; but you must! You must let me take care of you, until—"

He stopped, but Stella could finish the sentence for him, and her face flushed for a moment. But it was no time for blushing. She was all of a shake with agitation, with the mingling of surprise and joy, dread and pity.

"Is—is there any danger, Lord Lisle?" she asked in a breathless whisper. "You will tell me the truth. I know you will not keep anything from me. See, I am quite calm and strong. I can bear anything, everything, if you will only let me see him. You will help me, Lord Lisle. Will help *us?*"

"I will for—yes, I will say it—your sake *and* his," said Lisle, very gently and gravely. "This is not the first time I've seen and met your—your friend Mr. Rayne."

Stella stared at him with surprise.

"You! Why, where?"

He met the sweet, innocent eyes with a regard from which was crushed out, by a good man's strong will, all traces of his hopeless passion, and even touched her hand with a calm, confiding contact.

"In London. It is one of the strangest incidents of this strange history," he said; and he proceeded to tell her of his meeting with Rath and Edward at the hotel, and the way in which Rath had saved his life on the Embankment.

She listened with tears of pride, with her bosom heaving.

"Yes! It is like Rath!" she murmured, almost using Edward's words. "And they think him capable of murdering poor Nita! Lord Lisle, who *did* kill her? Was it her—her husband? Did she really see him that afternoon at the window?"

Lord Lisle shook his head slowly.

"I can't say. It is that which we have to discover. And now, you will go home to the Abbey—you will let us make it your home until— I have sent for Cecilia, and the carriage should be here by this time."

"No, no!" she said. "I cannot leave him; I must stay."

"But think of the pain you will endure. Ah! here is Cecilia. She will be able to persuade you—"

Cecilia uttered a cry of surprise and joy at sight of Stella, and caught her in her arms.

"You wicked, wicked girl! Where have you been? And why are you here? What is the matter?"

She looked from one to the other, and Lisle whispered:

"Take her home, Cis."

But Stella heard him, and clung to Lady Cecilia imploringly.

"No, no; don't ask me! *He* is in there, being tried—and I could not leave him. Let me stay, pray let me stay! I will be quite quiet. I will not let him speak to me. I will only look at him, and sit quite, quite still."

Lady Cecilia looked half frightened.

"I don't in the least know what you are talking about, or what you have to do with this dreadful business."

Lisle made a sign to her, for Stella was on the point of breaking down.

"Well, well, you shall stay; and Cecil will go with you, and I will come, too. You shall do what you please, if you will only promise not to run away again. Oh, what a great deal you have to tell me, when we *do* get home!"

Stella looked at her gravely and gratefully.

"Yes! More than you can guess," she said, brokenly. Then she turned, all feverish eagerness, to Lisle. "Is the time up? I do not want to miss anything—anything!"

Lisle, signing to his sister to look after her closely, hurried out and got a glass of wine, which Stella took and drank at once.

"I want all my strength," she said, simply. "It is so hard to keep from crying out: 'You are all mad, mad; he is innocent, innocent!'" Lisle stood over her with tender and fraternal care and anxiety.

"In a few minutes the time will be up. You shall rest in that dark corner—shut your eyes and try really to rest—while I tell Cecilia all that has happened."

She obeyed like a child, and remained almost motionless until she heard the tramping of the crowd as it fought its way back to the court.

Rath had been brought in before she entered on Lisle's arm, but the police had made a cordon round the dock, and she could not reach him excepting with her eyes. She saw—all saw—that his expression was changed. It had lost something of its gravity, and his eyes shone with a quiet joy as they sought the lovely face seated between Lord Lisle and Lady Cecilia at the solicitors' table.

But Mr. Bulpit looked grave enough. He had had his interview with Rath, and had advantaged—nothing. Indeed, to his legal mind, Rath's story sounded incredible. He did not know anything of his own or his father's history, knew nothing of Stella's or her mother's; in fact, Mr. Bulpit could make very little of the whole story.

"It's the queerest, maddest business I ever heard of," he growled to Edward. "It sounds like a melodrama without the clues, and the very recital of it will mystify and prejudice a jury against him."

The magistrates resumed their places on the bench, Ralph again taking his seat behind Lord Hatherley. He had had a drink of brandy at the Ratton Arms, and the spirit had given a hectic flush to the cheeks and an unnatural brightness to his eyes.

He scowled round the court and at Rath, then leant his elbow on Lord Hatherley's chair, and leant forward with bent head. The usher called for silence, the buzz and hum of the densely packed people subsided, and the superintendent rose.

"I intended calling Mr. Green, the officer in charge of the case, your worships, but he's not here. He went to London on business connected with the case and has not returned yet. I have produced all the evidence I have in my possession, your worships, and I ask for a remand."

Mr. Bulpit got up, snuff-box in hand. Whatever disappointment or discouragement he may have received during his interview with the prisoner, he showed nothing of it in face or voice or manner. He was just as calm and grim and self-contained as usual. The court waited for his opening words with close attention. Workley, seated in his former place beneath the witness-box, eyed him with moody impatience.

Rath alone had no eyes or attention for him, but looked at Stella as if his mind were concentrated on her.

"I have had an opportunity of conferring with my client, your worships," said the old lawyer, in the dry way which was so familiar to most of his audience, "and I have only a few words to address to you before I call my witnesses for the defence. And first I would desire to refer to the dramatic incident which has taken all of us by surprise. It is not often that a witness called by the prosecution bears such formidable testimony for the defence. You have heard Miss Mordaunt's remarkable story, gentlemen. Incredible as it may seem, it is true. It is true that the prisoner has spent his childhood, boyhood, and the opening years of his manhood—indeed, one may say all his life—on an almost unknown part of an island. I find that it is the western part of Vancouver. You will expect to hear from me something of his parentage, his connections. I can tell you *nothing* respecting them. The prisoner himself is in complete ignorance of his antecedents, of all the facts of his birth and upbringing. For him his life and his life's history date from the earliest remembrances of his life on the island."

There was a murmur of astonishment, of doubt. Ralph moved in his chair, and a sneer of incredulity sat upon his face, plain enough for all to see.

"He and his father lived alone until that father's death, when the prisoner became a solitary in solitude as intense as that of the man in the famous history with which we are all acquainted. Then the two women, Miss Mordaunt and her mother, appeared on the scene—waifs from the wreck of the 'Andromeda.' You have heard how he rescued and sheltered and provided for those two helpless women, and of how, soon after the death of her mother, Miss Mordaunt was carried away from the island."

All eyes were turned on Stella; but the fixed gaze did not embarrass her.

She was unconscious of the crowd, of everything and everyone, but of Rath standing there, with that light shining in his eyes as they rested on her.

"I now come to another phase of this singular romance of life. The advent of another character, another actor, on this strange scene—Mr. Edward Bryan.

"As you are aware, he is connected with this mystery by his friendship with the prisoner. I will call him; he shall tell you the story in his own words. Is there anyone in court who doubts his veracity, his credibility? Is there anyone on

the Bench who would refuse to accept the word, the sworn testimony of a Bryan?"

The old man's voice rose with an almost youthful ring.

"No? Let him tell his story, then, let him prove that it was impossible for the prisoner to have known, met, the unfortunate woman who was done to death, until the night on which the cruel murder was committed. Edward Bryan!"

Edward stepped to the witness-box.

"Mr. Bryan, I ask no questions. You will place the court in possession of your knowledge of the prisoner and the facts which have a bearing on the case."

As Edward told his story, the court listened with well-nigh breathless attention. He reserved, concealed, nothing. It was now nothing to him or Rath if others learnt of the discovery of the gold, and as he gave an account of it, the court stared and gaped. The prisoner with his partner were millionaires, then! The crowd moved restlessly and pushed forward to get a better, closer sight of the young and handsome man who possessed untold riches—and stood charged with wilful murder!

"Until you parted with Mr. Rayne, your friend and close companion for all those months, he was scarcely out of your sight?" asked Mr. Bulpit.

"No. Excepting for a few hours on the Monday night—"

"For which I can account," said Lord Lisle, involuntarily.

"Silence! silence!" cried the clerk, sternly.

"You left him at the station, you found him struggling with Mr. Workley and the gamekeepers. During the time of your friendship, partnership with him, have you ever heard him mention the name of the deceased?"

"No, sir."

"And, living alone in this desert island with the prisoner, you were in his entire confidence?"

"Yes."

"In all your knowledge of him, is there anything in his conduct which would lead you to consider him capable of such a crime?"

The clerk rose, but Edward was too quick.

"With all my acquaintance with him I have found him the truest, the noblest, the bravest of men, one quite incapable of any meanness or cruelty; and I am as sure of his innocence as I am of my own."

A murmur rose that was instantly suppressed.

"We will take that as evidence of character," said Lord

Hatherley, gravely. As he spoke, the superintendent looked towards the door, and rose with an air of relief.

"Mr. Green is here, your worships. Before I call him, I will hand to the court an article found on the prisoner."

"Why was it not produced before?" asked Lord Hatherley.

"I had entrusted it to Mr. Green, your worships," said the superintendent, "and by accident he failed to return it, and carried it with him to London."

He took the tin case from the detective and handed it up to Lord Hatherley, and went into the box and swore that he had found it on the prisoner.

The case was passed from one magistrate to another, and Mr. Bulpit frowned up at them.

"What is this?" he asked, testily. "These surprises are intensely trying, Mr. Superintendent, and extremely irregular."

"Mr. Green is my superior, sir," said the superintendent, apologetically. "I have to obey orders, and had to give the case to him."

"Well, what *is* it?" demanded Mr. Bulpit.

Rath leant forward, his eyes fixed on the tin box as it passed from hand to hand; then he turned to Stella.

"It is yours. I found it—"

"Silence!" cried the usher.

Lord Hatherley passed the case to the clerk, for Mr. Bulpit.

"It is tied and sealed," he said.

Mr. Bulpit turned it over, with irritable impatience.

"It must be opened, of course," he said. "I have no objection, and can offer none. It is the first time I have heard of its existence."

He looked at Rath, and from him to Stella.

"Shall they open it, Stella?" asked Rath, simply.

She rose.

"It is mine—it was my mother's," she said, as simply as Rath had spoken. "I left it on the island."

"Your worship must open it, of course," said Mr. Bulpit, slowly; and he handed the case back to the Bench.

CHAPTER XLII.

As Lord Hatherley took the small tin case in his hands, the clerk rose from his seat just beneath the bench and whispered to him.

"The witness, Miss Mordaunt, swears this is her property

We really have no right to open it, my lord; at least, that is my opinion. I think it would be the opinion of counsel if there were one here."

Lord Hatherley hesitated, and looked from one fellow-magistrate to another. The "Great Unpaid," as the county and borough Bench are often derisively and contemptuously called, are really conscientiously desirous of doing their duty, and of administering the law justly and legally, and these county gentlemen confronted with this difficulty paused and considered gravely. They knew that both public and press would be only too ready to censure them if they made a mistake.

"Hand the case to Miss Mordaunt," said Lord Parodel, and there was an echo of assent from most of the magistrates; but Ralph alone leant forward and said, half sullenly:

"It was found on the fellow—the prisoner; we've a right to open it, and I vote we do so."

"I doubt it, Lord Ratton," said the clerk, gravely; but Ralph eyed him with the contempt which men of his temperament consider the proper manner with which to treat inferiors.

"We have to decide that," he said, haughtily. "This thing may contain evidence which would convict the man—though, to my mind, there is quite enough."

Lord Hatherley interposed quickly.

"I will ask her," he said. Ralph shrugged his shoulders, and leant back with a smile and an air of resignation.

Meanwhile, the crowd, growing impatient in their curiosity, began to murmur amongst themselves, and the usher had to call "Silence!" sternly.

"Will you step into the box, Miss Mordaunt?" said Lord Hatherley. Lord Lisle took her hand and led her to the witness-box, and Stella stood as she had stood before, her hands gripping the edge of the box, her eyes, not downcast, but fixed, after a glance at Rath, on Lord Hatherley.

"You state, you swear, that this box is your property?" asked Lord Hatherley.

"Yes," she answered in a low but perfectly clear voice.

"When did you see it last?"

"On the morning of the day I was carried away from the island; I left it under my pillow. It was my mother's, my lord," she went on, with a tremor in her clear tones. My mother brought it with her from the ship in which we were wrecked. She carried it with her always."

"*How did the* prisoner come in possession—"

The clerk shook his head at the inadmissibility of the question; but Stella answered by turning to Rath.

"You found it, Rath, after—after I had gone?"

"Yes," he said, amidst the usher's cry for silence.

"Don't address the prisoner; answer his lordship, please."

"He found it, my lord, and he has kept it so carefully because"—the tears filled her eyes—"it belonged to me!"

Ralph nodded, as if this statement covered all the ground.

"Are you aware of its contents?" asked Lord Hatherley.

"No, my lord." The people in the body of the court moved excitedly. "I do not know; my mother did not tell me. I saw it only by accident, when she was alive—"

Lord Hatherley nodded.

"Miss Mordaunt, this box belongs to you; it is your private property. I do not think the court has any right to open it; and I shall take the responsibility of handing it to you after the examination has closed—"

The crowd expressed its disappointment by a low murmur.

—"I should advise you to place it in the hands of your nearest relation or guardian."

Stella shook her head.

"I have no one—but Rath," she said, simply. "He was my guardian."

"No relation?" said Lord Hatherley, gravely and pityingly. "Surely, there must be someone!"

Stella shook her head again.

"I know of no one," she said. "I am quite alone in the world—"

She glanced at Rath and stopped suddenly.

"Then let me advise you to consult my friend, Mr. Bulpit," said Lord Hatherley. "I am sure that whatever course he thinks you should follow will be the best for you. The case can in no way be connected with the charge against the prisoner, and the court will retain it intact until the examination has closed. The next witness, Mr. Bulpit."

Lord Lisle, after taking Stella to her seat, went into the box and gave his account of his meeting with Rath at the hotel and his subsequent rescue by him on the Embankment. The evidence made a marked impression upon the crowd, for most persons are aware of the fact that a man who is capable of the cold-blooded murder of a woman must be a coward at heart, and this further proof of Rath's courage was a striking evidence to character.

But Ralph leant forward with his insidious whisper:

"The man's a savage—just a savage. *I* think that tells against him!"

"I don't ask any questions of the witness," said Mr. Locke, the superintendent. "Lord Lisle has proved that the prisoner is hot-tempered—"

"No speech, please, Mr. Locke!" interrupted Mr. Bulpit, sharply.

By this time the court was growing dark, and there was a pause while the officers were lighting the gas; during this pause, Mr. Bulpit went to Stella; but before he could speak, she had turned to him with anxious eyes, and her trembling lips formed a question which her eyes put too plainly for need of words.

He raised his thick brows as he bent over her.

"I cannot tell, Miss Mordaunt; nothing but the whole truth can help us, and any reserve, any concealments, though they may not seem to be connected with the case—"

She understood in a moment, and darting a look at Rath, rose, and turning to the Bench, said, quickly:

"Please open the box, my lord; I—I wish it!"

There was a stir of excitement, the usual cry for silence, and Lord Hatherley looked with a thoughtful frown at the pale, beautiful face.

"The court is about to ask the prisoner if he desires to make any statement—"

Rath opened his lips, but Mr. Bulpit broke in:

"The prisoner makes no statement. He reserves his defence, my lord."

Rath made a movement with his hand.

"No," he said, quietly. "I have nothing to say. Why should I? Except that I never saw this poor woman, that I found her stabbed to death, and that if they had not attacked and seized me, I could have tracked the murderer easily enough."

There was a "sensation" at this startling assertion; and in the excitement Ralph's sudden shrinking behind Lord Hatherley's chair passed unnoticed.

"All that they say is true," continued Rath; "but I am innocent."

Ralph bent forward.

"Let us get it over," he whispered, huskily. "Commit him for trial!"

Lord Hatherley nodded, but was silent for a moment, fingering the box and looking at Stella, who still stood, her *bosom heaving*, her pale face quivering with emotion.

"Please open the box, my lord," she said. "It has nothing to do with the murder; but Mr. Bulpit—I—I— Oh, we only want you to know everything, and you will then see that he is innocent."

Mr. Bulpit gently pressed her into her seat.

"Miss Mordaunt is acting on my advice, my lord," he said, gravely.

Lord Hatherley inclined his head.

"Very good," he said; and he handed the tin case to the clerk.

The crowd pressed up close, and every eye fixed greedily on the clerk, as, with official slowness and dignity, he cut the tape and broke the seals, and took out some closely folded papers.

"They are documents, my lord," he said.

"Read them," said Lord Hatherley, looking at Stella, who made an assenting gesture.

The clerk unfolded a paper, and looked it over.

"This appears to be a kind of—of statement, my lord—a statement that gravely concerns Miss Mordaunt."

"Read it," said Stella, almost inaudibly: and amidst breathless silence, the clerk read aloud:

"'This statement is to be handed to my child Stella after my death. She is ignorant of her real name and parentage, and I desire that that ignorance shall remain unbroken until I have passed away. Her name is not Mordaunt. I am not a widow, but the wife of the most worthless of men, from whom I have fled with my child. I married him secretly, to learn, within a month of the marriage, that he had deserted me to return to the woman who should have been his wife. I have discovered that he has since married her. This bigamous marriage was committed in Australia. I have not sought redress for my wrongs; have suffered him to go unpunished. My child, if she should have reached womanhood, will understand why I have never mentioned her father's name, why I have kept the story of my great wrong buried in my own bosom, and that it is for her sake that I have allowed the man who so cruelly wronged me and his unborn child to go his own way unpunished by me. "Vengeance is mine," saith the Lord; and in God's hands I leave him. My child will now understand why I have lived and moved as if under the weight of a heavy load. It has been a weight almost unendurable. When she reads this, I shall have gone where such weary ones as I find rest. If her father should

be alive when she hears this story of his cruel desertion and crime, I charge her to forgive as I forgave—for the sinner it is never too late for repentance, and he may repent. I write this on the island on which we have been cast. In this box are my marriage certificate, the certificate of her birth, and such other evidence as will prove her his lawful daughter. If need be, she can claim her right to her father's name. I leave the decision to her.' "

The clerk paused, the crowd drew a long breath, not of satisfaction, but unsatisfied curiosity, and turned their eyes upon Stella, who sat like a stone, with Lord Lisle and Mr. Bulpit close beside her. She sat quite motionless, but her eyes were fixed on Rath, who was, by everybody else, quite forgotten.

"There is an addition to this statement, your worships," said the clerk. "It is written very indistinctly."

He drew a gas-branch nearer to him, and continued reading:

"'I have made a strange discovery. On this island is a young man who rescued us. His name is Rath Rayne. He has been here since a child, with his father. Last night—while arranging some books and papers which belong to him—we occupy his hut—I found an old portfolio. It was closed with a spring-lock, which came open as I held it. A paper fell out—'

"The writing abruptly ends here, my lord," said the clerk, gravely.

All eyes were turned on Rath, who stood calm and attentive as the clerk took some other papers from the case.

"These appear to be the certificates alluded to in the statement," said the clerk. "I will hand them to your lordship."

Lord Hatherley took them and spread them open.

"It is a certificate of marriage between Laura Mordsley and Ralph Percival," he said.

There was a cry, a sharp cry of surprise and amazement, and the crowd gazed at Ralph the earl; for the name of Percival—the family name of the Rattons—was as familiar to each man as his own. Ralph flushed and turned to Lord Hatherley savagely.

"Haven't we had enough of this?" he said, with a sneer.

Mr. Bulpit rose, a strange look on his face.

"May I see—?"

"*The marriage* took place on July 2, 1876, at St. Jude's-

St. James's, London; the witnesses are Harriet Coventry and William Workley."

With a swaying to and fro and a hushed cry, the crowd turned to Workley, who sat with his chin in his hands, his eyes fixed on Ralph with a look of moody indifference, as if nothing could move him.

"The certificate of the birth of Stella Percival is dated May, 1877, and she is described as the daughter of the Honourable Ralph Percival."

A cry went up from the crowd—a cry which the usher was powerless to silence. Here, seated in their midst, was the daughter of Ralph Percival, the father of the Earl of Ratton, who sat on the bench! In its confusion and bewilderment the people stared at each other.

Mr. Bulpit rose again. Two spots of hectic colour shone on his pale, wrinkled face, and his eyes flashed; for his acute legal mind had instantly grasped the full significance of the certificates, and his first impulse was to protect, to defend Ralph; for, though he disliked him, he was his client.

"My lord, I object—" he began; but Lord Hatherley held up his hand to stop him; then, with a confused air, he rose unsteadily.

"The court is adjourned," he said, with the agitation which was shared by all who looked at him—"is adjourned till to-morrow."

Instantly Rath was hurried from the dock. The Bench rose and turned into the magistrates' room, and the crowd, talking excitedly, poured in a confused mass out into the open air. Stella, who had risen in the vain hope of speaking to Rath before he was borne from her sight, stood pale and trembling, surrounded by the Lisles, Bryan, and Mr. Bulpit.

Lord Lisle was the first to recover his presence of mind.

"Take her home," he said to his sister in a low voice. "Take her home! I will follow directly."

Lady Cecilia drew Stella's arm within hers, and led her out to the carriage which had drawn up, and the three men were left staring at one another.

"Great Heaven!" exclaimed Edward. "If—if these certificates, papers, are—are all right, she is Ralph Percival's daughter, and heiress, if not to the title, to all the Ratton money!"

Mr. Bulpit's face was like a stone mask.

"I cannot discuss the matter with you, Mr. Bryan; my client, Lord Ratton—"

"*Lord* Ratton!" exclaimed Lisle. "Why—why—good

God!—if the other marriage was invalid, if it took place, as the statement stated, *after* that with Miss Mordaunt's mother —then—then—he is not the Earl of Ratton, but—but—"

There was no need to finish the sentence.

Mr. Bulpit's gaze was fixed right over the heads of the two men; and his lips were set tightly, as if he were so lost in self-communion as to be deaf to them.

"Good-evening," he said, moving away. "I have to see my client—"

"Which?" said Edward, rather angrily.

"Both," retorted the old man, sharply, as he turned and left them.

"He knows something more than the rest of us," said Edward. "I know the old man well; that look in his eyes—Let us go somewhere where we can think quietly, if only for a few minutes, Lisle."

"Ratton illegitimate!" exclaimed Lisle, under his breath. "Then—then who *is* the earl?"

"Who can tell! I don't know, and—forgive me, Lisle!—but I don't care. All this concerns Lord Ratton or whatever he is; but the more important fact for *me* still remains, that my friend is still under a charge for murder, and that I can see he is going to be committed! Beside that awful fact, nothing else has much interest for me. I wonder whether they will let me see him? Let us get outside, for Heaven's sake!"

CHAPTER XLIII.

RALPH accompanied his fellow-magistrates into the small room. It was only dimly lit, and he got out of the light as much as possible and stood with his back to the wall. He knew the date of his father's marriage to his mother well enough, knew that he was illegitimate, and no longer Earl of Ratton, but a nobody and nameless; and he expected that the men around him would turn their backs upon him.

But it scarcely need be said that he was wrong. They were gentlemen, and gentlemen stand by a man when he is down, especially when he has fallen through no fault of his own.

So, to his surprise, they gathered round him, eager to express their sympathy, and to offer encouragement, and, if need be, consolation.

Lord Hatherley was the first to speak. He had mastered his agitation, and, though grave enough, spoke easily, and with a faint smile.

"This case abounds in surprises, Ralph," he said. "I imagine this is one we need not count as serious."

"No, no!" said Lord Parodel, laying his hand on Ralph's shoulder. "Too much like a play at a theatre, eh, Ratton? Don't you upset yourself, don't you worry; you'll find that there's nothing in it."

"Of course not," echoed the young duke, nodding at Ralph cheerfully. "People are always disputing one's title nowadays, and laying claim to one's estates; but it never comes to much, does it?"

"My opinion is that it's either a forgery or a piece of delirious raving on the part of the poor woman. Been wrecked, you know, and lost her reason. See?" said another.

Ralph looked round with a sickly smile. Most men would have been grateful for their kindly consideration; but Ralph was incapable of gratitude; it is a plant that only grows on gracious soils.

"Oh, it's all right, thanks," he drawled. "I'm not afraid. It's a forgery, I daresay; and I suppose it will give me some trouble; but I shall fight the claim, and win, in the end, I've no doubt."

"Of course, of course!" was the chorus of assent.

Ralph passed his hand over his clammy forehead, and smiled again, and Lord Hatherley drew him out of the room.

"The carriage is waiting, Ralph; and if you are half as tired as I am, you will be glad to get home."

As they made their way through the crowd which still hung about the court-house, Ralph saw Workley standing talking to Green.

Ralph made a sign to him, and Workley, scarcely turning his head, nodded sullenly.

"This is a troublesome business, Ralph," said Lord Hatherley, as they were driven through the mob. "Of course the dates are wrong, and—and—"

"Of course!" responded Ralph, defiantly. "The dates in the certificate have been altered—I mean that my mother was married before this woman, whoever she was. Do you think Bulpit would have recognised my claim, that he doesn't know his business?"

"Just so, just so! We must meet the claim boldly; and I've no doubt it will soon be disposed of. But what a romance! If that young girl should be your half-sister, Ralph!"

Ralph swore savagely.

"She's an impostor!" he exclaimed. "She is as bad as the scoundrel in the dock! It is all a plant, a conspiracy!

But we will deal with her after we have dealt with him. He'll be committed to-morrow, and—and—" He stopped, for his words had recalled the sense of his own peril which this sudden discovery had, strange to say, driven out. "You —you won't tell Mary?" he said in a low voice.

"Certainly not. I shall take care that she knows nothing whatever of this awful business. She is ill enough as it is, poor girl!"

When they reached the Hall gates, Ralph stopped the carriage.

"I'll get out here," he said. "I'm tired, and shall be glad to be alone and quiet."

Lord Hatherley assented at once.

"Will you come round later—shall I come to you?" he asked, considerately; but Ralph shook his head.

"I think I'd rather be alone," he said.

He walked up the avenue with dragging step, for now that he was out of observation the fictitious courage waned quickly.

He fancied that the footman who opened the door, the butler who stood by, Parkins, who noiselessly hurried to meet him, displayed in their countenances their knowledge of his true position; and with a harsh, "Keep dinner till I ring," went straight to his den, and, of course, straight to the cellaret.

What should he do? The question hammered at his hot brain as, half unconsciously, he drank glass after glass of brandy.

At one moment he had almost decided to take refuge in flight; the next, as the brandy mounted to his brain, and lent him its insidious warmth, he resolved to face the situation, and fight against the claimant, whoever he might be.

A knock at the window made him start and clutch at a chair for support; but he knew who to expect, and opening the window, let Workley in.

"You want to see me?" he said, scarcely raising his eyes to Ralph's face.

Ralph noticed the absence of "my lord," and gnawed at his lip.

"Yes. I know now why you blackmailed me. I want the truth, and you'd better tell me, for your own sake, Workley," he began.

Workley waved his hand, and leant against the sideboard, his eyes fixed on the floor.

"There is no need for threats," he said in a hollow, weary

voice. "You know the truth now. I was present at your father's marriage."

"The—the one—"

"The one in London—yes. And strange to say, I saw him a week after his other marriage—to your mother—in Melbourne. He was on the spree, and in a fit of the blues he told me what he had done. It was bigamy, right enough."

"Then—then—my mother—I—"

"You were born a year before her marriage," said Workley, with a callous indifference which intensified Ralph's agony of impotent fury. "You are, therefore, illegitimate—"

"I am not the earl—not—not—"

"Certainly not."

"Curse—" broke from Ralph's white lips; but Workley stopped him with a gesture.

"Your own father! But please yourself. What do you want with me?"

Ralph paced up and down.

"What—what am I to do?" he asked, hoarsely.

Workley shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't know. See here, my lord—that is—ah, well! it doesn't matter—I've too much on my mind to interest myself in your affairs. I've been hit badly—" His voice grew husky. "The woman I loved—" He could not go on for a moment or two. "I've only one thing to live for—to see the man who did it swing."

Ralph started, and eyed him sideways.

"There's no doubt of that scoundrel's guilt," he said. "The evidence—"

"Yes," broke in Workley, savagely; "but the court's with him! I can see it! Don't tell me! I can see it!"

Ralph nodded.

"Y-es; perhaps it is. But I'm not. I'll stand out for his committal if—if you'll keep by me in this fix."

"What can I do?" asked Workley.

"Say that—that the thing's a forgery—that the marriage took place a month later—"

Workley shook his head.

"No use. There's the registry in London."

Ralph groaned, and wiped the sweat from his brow.

"What—what do you advise? Help me, Workley! I've no one but you."

Workley looked at him with scarcely veiled contempt.

"Show fight," he said; "show fight as long as you can, and while the struggle's going on, get as much money to-

gether as you can, and"—he nodded significantly—"that is what I should do. What else is there?"

Ralph made a gesture of impatience.

"To lose all!" he whined. "I'll give you some money."

Workley mixed himself a glass of brandy and water.

"Your loss is nothing compared with mine," he said, brokenly. "My life's finished with. It—it was for *her* that I wanted that farm. Now I want nothing but my revenge. And I'll have that!"

His hand clenched on the glass as it struck his sharply closed teeth.

Ralph shuddered as Workley moved to the window.

"Wait! Who—who is the heir?—but you won't know. I must see Bulpit—Bulpit will help me for his own sake."

Workley shrugged his shoulders again and opened the window.

"All the Bulpits in the world can't help you to keep the title; and the money belongs to that young lady, your father's lawful daughter," he said. "Take my advice and—make hay while the sun shines."

Ralph watched him go down the terrace, then threw himself in a chair, and tried to weigh Workley's advice.

Flight! It seemed the only thing to do. But to surrender everything—title, money, Mary— Ah, Mary! whom he was now free to marry! No; he would remain and fight it out!

But he wavered and hesitated two or three hours before he fell into the stupor of exhaustion and intoxication, and he even went so far as to try and calculate how much ready money he could lay his hands on; but the dawn creeping through the curtains found him lying in the chair with pallid face and twitching lips; and when the court assembled on the morrow he was in his former seat behind Lord Hatherley's chair, trying to face the curious, eager eyes of the crowd and the sympathy of his fellow-magistrates with a forced smile of confidence and serenity.

Ralph was a scoundrel of the worst type; but there was the Ratton blood in his veins; and, in that strange way in which blood shows itself, it was manifest in him now.

The crowd was, this day, a singularly quiet one. The intensity of the interests involved was too great to permit of any noise, and the jammed and packed mass stood shoulder to shoulder in perfect silence.

Even when Stella, accompanied by the Lisles, entered, it made no sound, and beyond a murmur, it gave no sign when Rath was brought in, and, going to the front of the dock,

looked round for Stella, smiled calmly, and waited as if he were the last person in the court to have cause for fear.

Almost as soon as the Bench were seated, Mr. Bulpit rose.

"My lord," he said, "for reasons which will shortly appear, I retire from the case. Mr. Grahame will more worthily fill my place."

There was a start of surprise as the well-known barrister rose; for no one knew that Mr. Bulpit had wired for him and had been in consultation with him during a greater part of the night.

The famous counsel bowed to the Bench.

"I have an application to make, your worships, and that is that the prisoner's name should be altered on the charge-sheet."

The words were spoken so calmly and quietly that for a moment no one caught their significance. Rath turned and glanced at the counsel, then looked from Stella to Edward, who, pale with excitement, nodded reassuringly, and the spectators held their breath.

Lord Hatherley was silent for a moment, then he said:

"What name do you wish to appear, Mr. Grahame?"

Mr. Grahame picked up an old leather portfolio from the desk before him and opened it, then he replied as calmly as before:

"Rath Percival, my lord—*Rath Percival, Earl of Ratton.*"

There was no sound for a moment or two, then the crowd stirred and sent up a hoarse and impressible shout of amazement; the magistrates sat as if dumbfounded; Stella uttered a cry and caught Cecilia's arm.

"What—what do you say?" faltered Lord Hatherley. "(Sit still, Ralph!") for Ralph had risen with white face and staring eyes. He sank into his seat, clutching the back of Lord Hatherley's chair. "What do you say? This—this cannot be true! It—it is impossible!"

Mr. Grahame shook his head gravely.

"I understand and appreciate your astonishment, my lord; but I make the request on my own responsibility, and am fully aware of its gravity. I will add, my lord, that I hold in my hands full and indisputable proofs of the identity of my client. We shall make our claim in the proper place, at the proper time; but I submit that I am within my right in requesting that my client be described as I state."

It was useless for the usher to demand silence; and for a moment or two the noise of voices, the shuffling of feet, as

the crowd swayed to and fro in its excitement, reigned supreme.

At last silence was obtained, and Lord Hatherley, rising in his agitation, held up his hand.

"Mr. Grahame"—he struggled for composure—"we have the right to ask—"

"Quite so, my lord," said the counsel. "I had thought that the court would have been somewhat prepared for my announcement." He glanced at Rath. "The resemblance to the late Lord Ratton, the fact that the Lady Ratton who died on the island spoke of a strange discovery—" He made a movement with his hands, as if he were surprised at their want of acuteness. "My lord, I have here in his father's handwriting—which my friend Mr. Bulpit recognises—in certificates whose genuineness no one could dispute, evidence that my client is indeed the claimant to this historic title. He is the son of Harold Percival, who, with his infant son, left England under family circumstances of a painful character, and was wrecked in the 'Georgia.' He, with his child, was washed ashore on the western coast of Vancouver, and died there. My client has been in ignorance of his own name and rank until this moment; but his claim to the title and estates are, I hold, indisputable. My lord, I regret that we should be compelled to encumber this case with this statement, but I am only doing my duty in stating that the prisoner in the dock is the Earl of Ratton."

Ralph sprang to his feet. He was pale no longer, but crimson with fury, and the hand he extended was clenched defiantly.

"It is a lie—a conspiracy! I—"

Lord Hatherley, trembling, and powerless to check the tumult, rose and caught his arm.

"For God's sake, sit down!" he cried, agitatedly. "This is not the time—the place—"

Ralph sank down, his blood-shot eyes glaring round defiantly; and the clerk whispered to the magistrates.

"The Bench has no reason to refuse your application, Mr. Grahame," he said, at last. "You can choose any name you please for your client, but you act on your own responsibility."

Mr. Grahame bowed.

"I proceed with the case," he said, with splendid calm. "I call Richard Green."

The detective forced his way through the dense mass.

There was an air of suppressed excitement in his manner and movements, and all saw that he held a paper in his hand.

"Richard Green, Police Officer, Intelligence Department," he began in official form, after he had been sworn, "I am in charge of this case."

"Do you offer evidence against the prisoner, Mr. Green?" asked Grahame.

"No, sir."

The crowd stared in absolute silence.

"You withdraw the charge?"

"Yes, sir."

Lord Hatherley leant forward.

"I—I do not understand!" he said.

"I have obtained information, my lord, which renders a withdrawal of the charge necessary and just. My lord, I have discovered the name of the deceased woman's husband. I found the certificate in an old dress of the deceased's—" went on Mr. Green, more calmly; but before he could get any farther, an interruption arose.

One of the magistrates had risen and was standing, swaying to and fro heavily. It was Ralph.

"I'm—I'm ill!" he gasped, thickly. "Air! I must have air! let me go! Let me get outside!"

Mr. Green made a strange movement, as of protest, but he said nothing, and Ralph staggered out.

Green went on in the dry, metallic voice of the policeman who has the case at his fingers' ends and sees his way with perfect clearness.

"The name, my lord, is Bannister, Ralph Bannister."

A man rose from just beneath the witness-box and uttered a sharp cry. It was Workley.

"Bannister!" he cried, hoarsely. "Bannister! I know him! He is the man who has just left the court—follow him! Arrest him! She was found dead in his woods—it is Lord Ratton!—I knew him in London—I have known all the time that his name was Bannister!"

A couple of policemen forced him into his seat and kept him there; and Green continued:

"I have traced this man Bannister through his life in London since his marriage. He deserted his wife and claimed the Ratton title. I have traced his footsteps from the spot where the murder was committed to his private room at the Hall. I am in possession of the coat and shirt he wore on the night of the murder, and I have other evidence which I will lay before your worships when—"

His voice was drowned by the varied cries which rose. Lord Hatherley and the other magistrates sat like images of stone. Stella, with a sob of relief, ran with outstretched hands towards the dock, and no one sought to restrain her.

Rath bent down and took her hands.

"All right, Stella!" he said, gently, soothingly. "All right! Ah, don't cry, Stella!" for the tears were running down her face; and, with the electric sympathy which stirs a crowd, the other women in the court were also weeping. In vain the usher and the police sought to restore order. Lord Hatherley rose, and some words fell from his lips, of which only one—"Discharge"—was audible. The two policemen fell away from Rath, as Lisle and Edward rushed at him, and the crowd pressed about the dock and stared and shouted at him, half mad with the frenzy of excitement.

"For God's sake, get him out—call a carriage!" cried Edward. "Oh, take care of Miss Mordaunt!" for the heaving mass was pressing upon her dangerously.

Rath heard the warning, and, bending down, put his great arms round her and lifted her into the dock; and at the sight of the two standing there, hand in hand, a shout of satisfaction, of delight, made the old timbers of the roof ring again.

Mr. Grahame forced his way to Green.

"The man—Bannister!" he said, sharply.

Green nodded.

"He can't get away. I've my eye on him. I want to speak to Workley. Ah!" He caught his breath. "He's gone! There'll be mischief! Make way there! Make way, I say!" and he fought his way towards the door with a look of apprehension on his face.

CHAPTER XLIV.

RATH and Stella found themselves outside the court and in the centre of the High Street, surrrounded by a vast crowd, every member of which seemed to have one desire in life—to stare at these two and to shout uproariously.

Most girls would have been frightened to death under such circumstances, but Stella was not at all alarmed. Rath's strong arm was round her, and she could feel his heart beating against hers with the steady beat of the strong man whose strength is displayed at its highest in such moments as these. She was not afraid, though there were tears in her eyes, and she laughed, from excess of joy, as the crowd pressed round them cheering and striving to shake Rath's disengaged hand.

She knew that she was quite safe—Rath had in the past protected her against worse perils than a friendly mob—and she was too happy for words.

It was hard to realise that he was near her, that he, who but a few minutes ago was in such terrible danger, should be free, and not only free, but the idol of the hour; for, as is always the case, the public sentiment and sympathy had taken a swift turn, and now threatened to overwhelm him.

At last Edward managed to get at them. He was far more excited than Rath, who stood above the crowd with bare head and gravely smiling face.

"I've got the carriage, Rath—it's down this side street; there's no getting to the front. The Lisles are there, and my father—for Heaven's sake, good people, let them come; my friend must be tired—the young lady—"

The crowd cheered all the more lustily, but they made a lane for Rath and Stella, and Edward led them to the carriage, where they were welcomed most warmly by Edward's father and by the Lisles.

How it happened, Stella never knew, but she found herself in the Lisles' carriage with Cecilia, while Rath was borne off by the Bryans. They had scarcely bidden each other "good-morning," and they had been separated in the confusion inevitable in such a scene.

Indeed, Stella scarcely realised that he was not with her, that she had been separated from him again, before she reached the Abbey and Cecilia had insisted on taking her straight to her own room.

"And now you must lie down and rest," said Cecilia.

But Stella would have none of this.

"I don't want to rest. I want to talk and listen. I want to tell you everything—and hear everything. I feel as if I were in a dream. One moment my heart is aching for that poor woman, the next I am throbbing all over with joy at the thought that Rath is free—that he is near me, that I can see and speak to him. You know all that he did for me, how he saved my life on the island, and thought for me every hour in the day; how he watched over and protected me. Do you think there was ever any man like him—so good, so noble, so—so handsome?"

"My dear Stella, he is a hero, a Greek god—no, better than that—a man!—and I have never seen his like. No wonder the people are mad about him. I shall never forget that grand, calm face of his which never for a moment showed a sign of weakness or fear, though his life appeared to be at

stake, and everything was against him. You are a very lucky girl, dearest, to have such a friend, to be engaged to such a man."

Stella stopped in her pacing up and down the room; the blood surged to her face, and she looked with a startled expression at Cecilia.

"I'm—I'm not engaged to him!" she faltered, almost inaudibly.

Cecilia stared at her.

"Not—not engaged to him!" she exclaimed, almost as inaudibly. "Why—why! I don't understand."

"I'm not engaged to him," repeated Stella, still blushing. "He—he has never spoken a word of love to me; he was a friend, a brother—that is all."

Cecilia grew crimson now.

"But, Stella, dearest!" she stammered, as a sense of Stella's equivocal position flashed upon her, "you were with him alone on the island. It is quite evident that he is madly in love with you, and that you— Forgive me, dear, if I speak plainly, but," she laughed softly, "everyone can see that you are just dying of love for each other, and that there is no question— And what is there to prevent it? I think you must be very rich—you are a Ratton. I'm not sure that we shall not have to call you *Lady* Stella—and there can be no doubt that he is the real Earl of Ratton and master of the Hall. There couldn't be a more suitable match. Besides," she laughed softly again and put her arm round Stella, "it is almost as if you were married already; why, you neither of you could marry anyone else. It is most splendid!"

She meant well, her words were prompted by the truest friendship and affection; but in speaking thus plainly, she had not allowed for that maidenly pride which was one of Stella's chief characteristics; and the effect of her speech upon Stella simply appalled her; for Stella's face went pale, and, withdrawing herself from Cecilia's arms, she stood at a little distance, looking straight before her, as if she were realising the full significance of her friend's words.

"You think that—that he is bound to marry me?" she said at last, very slowly. "'That because we were together on the island, the world will think that it is his *duty* to do so? No, no; don't speak! *I* know what you said; I can see by your face what you think—that he is bound to me—that he is not free to choose—that the world will think—"

She flung up her hands before her suddenly hot face and stood as if overwhelmed with shame.

Cecilia was silent and aghast at what she had done.

"Oh, forgive me—forgive me, Stella!" she exclaimed. "I never meant—"

Stella held out both hands to her with a smile full of tenderness.

"There is nothing to forgive," she said. "You have only told me the truth; and is it not better that I should hear it from you, who love me, than from others? I must think over what you have said. Rath is a great man now; he must be free to take his own way in life, to choose—to choose—" She nearly broke down, but mastered her emotion with a great effort. "How selfish I am to think of anything but his escape from the peril in which he was placed, and the good fortune which has come to him! I think I will lie down, for I feel suddenly tired. I will come down presently. Thank Lord Lisle for me for all his goodness to me and his kindness to Rath? I won't attempt to thank you—why should I? You know how grateful I am, how my heart—yes, I will lie down—and rest."

Cecilia was almost in tears; but she kissed Stella and left her without a word.

Meanwhile, Rath had been taken home to Bryan Court, where, it is needless to say, he was at once surrounded by hero-worshippers of the most pronounced type. Lady Bryan regarded him as the man who had saved Edward's life and given him a fortune, and Sir Gilbert was full of admiration for the heroic qualities and patrician bearing of this young man who had spent the whole of his life in an island solitude.

In scriptural language, they set food before him and tended on him as if he had come through some terrible danger, some fight against overwhelming odds—as indeed he had. Edward could scarcely keep his hand off Rath's shoulder, and hovered about him as if he were afraid that Rath might be snatched from his side again, and the younger members of the family gazed at him with awe and admiration, as they might have gazed at a particularly young and gallant Robinson Crusoe or modern Bayard. Before many minutes, Rath had got one of the little Bryan girls on his knee; and she nestled against him, simply "blown out with pride," as one of her brothers candidly informed her afterwards.

"Of course you will stay here, Rath," said Sir Gilbert, who had caught the "Rath" from Edward, and, indeed, would have found it difficult at present to call him "Ratton." "You will make this, Edward's home, your home,

until—until your affairs are settled. We won't speak of that wretched, unfortunate man."

Rath looked up and nodded. Then he looked round shyly, and, with a boyish blush, asked in a low voice:

"Where is Stella?"

"The Lisles took her home," said Edward. "We thought it better that she should rest."

"Yes," assented Rath, quietly, and as if he understood. "I will go to her presently. She will want me," he added, with a simplicity which touched Lady Bryan.

While they were talking, Mr. Bulpit was announced. After greeting the Bryans he went up to Edward and held out a hand.

"I must beg your pardon for troubling you so soon, Lord Ratton"—they all started at the "Lord Ratton"—"but I am sorry to say it is necessary. The suddenness with which the truth has been flashed upon us, the terrible discovery that the criminal is in possession of your title and estates, the fact that he is my client—yes, Sir Gilbert, the unfortunate man is still my client—and, though I would give ten years of my life to range myself on this gentleman's side, I cannot do so. I am a lawyer; the traditions of my profession—" He paused for a moment, then went on grimly: "I may or may not be convinced of the justness of your claims; but I have come to tell you that while my client, the present holder of the title, is capable of defending its possession, I shall fight against you. I shall defend him at the Criminal Court to the best of my poor ability as I should defend the poorest and humblest of my clients, and I shall, on his behalf, contest your claim." The old man's voice was broken with emotion as he continued: "But—but, in spite of this attitude which, as a lawyer, I am compelled to adopt, I will be glad if you will permit me to shake hands with you and to express my sympathy with you. If my client, the present holder of the title, be acquitted of the crime of which he is charged, he may succeed in keeping you out of the estates and title for years; and I have to beg that when you think of me, you will regard me as a lawyer who is endeavouring to do his duty according to the lights which guide the profession to which he has the honour to belong."

It is needless to say that half of this was Greek to Rath, but he understood the purport of the whole, and holding his hand to the old man, said:

"*That's* all right. I think I understand. You stand by

a man when he is down—as you stood by me just now. Isn't that so?"

"That is it, exactly," assented Mr. Bulpit, huskily, as, with another shake of Rath's hand, he left the room.

"Poor Bulpit, I am sorry for him," said Edward. "You can see that he believes, that he is convinced of the justness of your claim, of the guilt of that wretched man; but he is the best type of an honourable lawyer, and he'll stand by Ratton—I beg your pardon, Rath—he'll stand by his client to the last."

Of course there was a great deal of rapid and excited talk. The life on the island; the discovery of the gold; the murder; Rath's strange and exalted position were all discussed; but Rath listened rather than talked; and presently he grew restless and absent-minded, and suddenly he said:

"I will go to Stella now. She will be expecting me."

Edward nodded.

"I'll drive you over," he said.

It was only natural that he should be compelled to suppress a sigh when he spoke. For the happiness which awaited Rath contrasted strongly with his, Edward's, unhappiness.

Rath was going to the girl he loved, the girl who loved him; but Edward could not go to Mary, though his heart was full of her. What must she be suffering at this moment! The man she had promised to marry was accused of a cruel and cowardly murder, was in danger of losing his title and estates, was, as Edward thought, lying in Ratton gaol.

Edward would have given all the wealth he possessed to have been able to go to her and comfort her; yes, though he could not have permitted himself to have spoken a word of love. To have taken her hand, to have whispered, "Mary, whatever happens, I am still your friend, trust to me, lean on me," would have been some consolation in his present condition; but he knew that he could not go to her. Like a true friend, he put self behind him as he drove Rath to the Abbey, and talked of nothing but Rath's affairs.

But Rath listened absently to the references to his new and enviable position. To him it did not seem of any consequence whether he remained simply "a Rath Rayne" of the island, or became "Earl of Ratton," and master of Ratton Hall. All his thoughts were of Stella, and as they approached the Abbey, he was possessed by a feverish impatience which rendered him deaf to every word Edward said.

When they reached the house, Lisle came forward to meet them, and grasped Rath's hand. Lisle had spent a quiet hour

in his own room, and, with the inherent nobility of his class, had schooled himself to meet this lover of the girl he himself loved; and there was no reserve in the friendliness in which he greeted Rath.

"You want to see Miss Mordaunt—I beg her pardon, Miss Ratton, or is it Lady Ratton?" he said, with a smile. "She has just gone into the garden with my sister. You will find them in the arbour." He laid his hand on Rath's shoulder. "You will want to go to them at once. Come into the house when you have seen them; my sister, all of us, want to tell you how glad we are, how we sympathise—"

Rath, with a nod, strode away towards the arbour.

At his approach, Cecilia, who had been sitting in the sheltered summer-house with Stella—and almost in silence—rose, and, with a murmured word, made her escape by a side path. Stella sat, her heart beating fast, the colour coming and going in her face. Every step of his echoed in her heart, and in the few seconds which intervened before he stood before her, all her life on the island passed across her brain.

He paused for a moment at the entrance, then came in, his arms extended, and with her name on his lips.

But Stella remained seated, her eyes downcast, her face pale.

"Stella!" he cried, not loudly, but with all his love in his voice. "I have come."

"How do you do, Lord Ratton?" she said.

He stared at her, his hands fell to his sides, and he looked at her with amazed, bewildered eyes.

"Stella," he said, reproachfully, "are you not glad to see me?"—for the change in her manner, the white face, and tightly set lips, daunted him. "What is the matter?"

"Nothing," she said, with unnatural calm, though her heart was beating wildly. "I am glad you have come. I wanted to tell you—to congratulate you. You are the Earl of Ratton—I—I am—all your friends are so glad."

He looked at her in amazement.

"The Earl of Ratton? Am I? They say so. I don't understand—yet. What does it matter? Nothing matters but that you and I are together again. Think of it, Stella! Together! never to part any more—never!"

She could scarcely breathe; the longing to cast herself upon his breast, to feel his arms round her, nearly thrust maidenly pride itself from its place.

"Y-es," she faltered. "But—but I am going away. I

have just been telling Lady Cecilia that—that I—I want to go away; that—"

"Very well," he said, cheerfully; "we'll go anywhere you like. Stella!"—as if smitten by a sudden idea—"let us go back to the island! Yes, that's what we'll do!"

She caught her breath and tried to smile; but it was a wavering, uncertain smile; for oh! how she longed to be there with him alone!

Alone!

"You—you can scarcely do that. You are a great man now, Rath—a very great man, here in England, and you will have to stay and—and—"

"Shall we?" he said, with a short laugh. "Who says so? I don't think I care much for England. I like the island best—that is, when you are there."

"But I shall not be there," she faltered. "I shall be here."

"Then I won't go," he said, simply. "I'll stay here with you, of course. How pale you look! Different to what you did on the island. Better let us go back there, Stella. We—we were happy there!"

At this, poor Stella's breath failed her for a moment.

"You—you think you were," she faltered. "But—but you did not know then that you were an English nobleman; that—that you were somebody of consequence."

"Am I?" he said, unmoved by this feminine argument. "You want me to stay here? All right. It shall be as you say. Wherever you want to go, whatever you want to do, of course I will do."

"But—but," she stammered, "what have I to do with it?"

He looked at her. The lovely downcast face was turned from him; a vague something, which he could not understand, had come between them. This morning she had clung to him willingly enough, her eyes—

He wanted to see those eyes again, and he turned to her so that he could see, not the eyes, but the long lashes.

"Stella!" he said in a low voice, vibrating with passion. "Stella!"

She did not speak or move.

"What has come to you? Why do you turn away from me? What have I done? Are you angry with me as you used to be sometimes on the island? Angry? I thought you were glad this morning? I never understand you. I remember when I carried you across the beach the day you were

tired, you were angry. Stella, I—I don't understand. Look at me, speak to me!"

His heart was beating furiously; the longing to clasp her to him was mounting, mounting swiftly to his brain.

"What has come between us? You don't want to go back to the island—you will not speak. Ah!" With a sudden cry he had risen and stood before her. "You have forgotten me—don't care for me—you want me to go without you—to leave you!"

He broke off with a fierce laugh, the laugh of the man who knows what he wants, and who is too ignorant of civilisation to refrain from snatching it.

"You can't do that, you can't leave me! I—I should die without you! Why, I nearly died when you were carried from the island! And to lose you again!"

At the horrid thought, he caught her in his arms, lifting her bodily from the seat, and pressed her to him, half laughing, half sobbing, distraught with passion and with dread.

"Stella! I—I love you! I love you! I love you! I can't go back, I can't live without you! They can have everything else! Only you—you—you! I must have *you!*"

For an instant she surrendered to his passionate appeal. To lie in his embrace, to feel his strong arms round her—holding her. Ah, well; only a woman who has loved with all her heart and soul can understand Stella's sensations at that moment. She lay still as his kisses rained on her face and hair, fierce kisses proclaiming his love and fiercely demanding hers. Then she made an effort.

"Rath! Rath! you must not—you must not! Ah, let me go! It is all changed now, all different! You are the Earl of Ratton. You are free to—to choose—"

He gazed down at her with a bewildered, non-comprehending air.

"What? What is all this you are saying? I am *Rath,* and you are *Stella!* My Stella! Are you angry with me about something? Because I am somebody else than I used to be? What does it matter? I am Rath, you are Stella! And you belong to me!"

"Ah, that—that is just it, just why—why I cannot! Ah, let me go, Rath! I—I can't marry you!"

She expected him to loose her, to fall back aghast, overwhelmed; but instead he smiled, actually smiled.

"All right," he said, cheerfully, but with his eyes still flashing. "Who wants you to? We'll go back to the island and be just as we were. I didn't marry you there—I was

happy just because I had you with me—and I was satisfied—I think. Never mind about marrying me. Come back with me; let us go back to the old life, that's all I ask!"

She gasped, then hung her head before his innocence, his great, unselfish love. Then—oh, Eve, who bequeathed to all your daughters the terrible charm before which the sons of men bow the knee of the slave!—she wound her arms round his neck, and slowly—as one spins out a great delight and unspeakable joy—drew his head down to her and—of her own accord—kissed him on the lips. And with that kiss surrendered.

CHAPTER XLV.

RALPH had staggered from the bench and into the magistrate's room.

From Green's significant words, "We have found the name of the deceased's husband," Ralph knew that the desperate game he was playing was finished, and that he had lost. There was nothing for it now but flight. Behind him was the hangman with hot feet and trailing rope, before him only the faintest chance of escape.

With trembling hand he seized the jug of water from the table, and pouring some into his hands, dashed it across his forehead; for he felt sick and faint with terror; then he left the room by the private door.

He was not a moment too soon, for, at a sign from the superintendent, a police officer in plain clothes had followed him; but the moment, short as it was, was of all importance to Ralph; for almost in that short space of time he found himself in the midst of a wild, excited crowd which surged against the court-house in an utterly futile attempt to enter and participate in the sensational incidents which were proceeding there.

Ralph, bending his head, skirted the howling mass and made for one of the small streets leading to the station.

As he went across the square, he heard the howls change to wild, tumultuous cheering, and guessed the cause. The prisoner was acquitted, the man he had instinctively hated was free, free to step into *his*—Ralph's—place. He was no longer a suspected criminal, and it was Ralph who was flying from justice.

He set his teeth hard and hurried on. At the end of the lane, which was absolutely deserted, he paused, and with his

hand to his brow, strove to realise his well-nigh hopeless situation, and form some plan.

To go to the station would be madness, for the detective would have been certain to place a policeman waiting to arrest him. Besides, barring a few pounds, he had no money, and without money escape was impossible.

He must go back to the Hall. But there also he would doubtless find a detective waiting to pounce upon him. And yet, money he must have. There was about a couple of hundred pounds in the safe in his room, and his jewellery, which was worth a fairly large sum; for, like most vain men, Ralph had been liberal to himself in the matter of diamond pins and rings and similar gewgaws.

As he stood pondering, he heard the sound of horses' feet, and his heart leapt with swift terror; but, to his relief, one of his own grooms turned the corner with a couple of horses he was exercising. Ralph jumped at the chance offered him, and signing to the man to pull up, said:

"This is fortunate. I have to go to Roysdale Station. Give me your horse, and ride on the other to the court, and tell Lord Hatherley where I have gone. He will understand. Is—is—anyone waiting for me at the Hall?" he asked, as he sprang into the saddle.

"No, my lord; not that I know of, and I've just come straight from home," replied the man.

Ralph nodded.

"Remember, Roysdale Station. I have to meet someone there."

The man touched his hat and rode off, and Ralph turned his horse homewards.

He entered the park by one of the side gates, tied up the horse, and keeping within the shadow of the trees as much as possible, gained the Hall by the window of his den. With frenzied haste he unlocked the safe and took out the bundle of notes; then he went, forcing himself to walk slowly, through the hall and up to his dressing-room.

There he met Parkins face to face. The man started at the sight of his master's pallid countenance, and exclaimed:

"Anything—anything the matter, my lord? Are you ill?"

"No, no," replied Ralph. "But—but I've had bad news. A near relative is—is ill—dying—and I must go to London at once. Pack a portmanteau. I'll help you."

"Yes, my lord. Shall I order the carriage?"

"No, no—I mean I have ordered it. Here, I'll help you.

Get a box of cigars from my room; and, Parkins, you need not say anything to the other servants."

"No, my lord. Might I venture to ask the news from the court?"

"Committed for trial," said Ralph, hurriedly. "He's guilty, of course. Look sharp!"

Parkins ran down, and Ralph quickly collected the most valuable of his jewellery and put it into his pocket. Then he went down-stairs by the back way, so as not to meet Parkins, and waited in the passage behind the hall until he heard the man ascend again.

It would take Parkins half an hour to pack. By that time, Ralph, mounted on a good horse—and the one he had left tied up at the gate was one of the best—he would be well on his way to the junction.

He was passing through his den, when a bottle of brandy caught his attention. He paused, and not seeing a glass, drank a draught from the bottle itself. The spirits added fuel to his excitement, and he laughed with a kind of hysteria as he thought that, after all, he stood a chance. How many murderers had escaped arrest during the last twelve months? He would go to London and stay there—only fools ran their necks into a noose by attempting to leave one of the ports. In that human bee-hive he could hide until a chance of quitting the country presented itself.

He said this to himself as he slipped a revolver into his pocket and drank some more brandy; then he opened the window—and saw Workley running across the lawn, his face white and set—a human sleuth-hound on the warm track!

Ralph shrank back behind the curtain and waited, his breath coming in sharp gasps, his hand feeling for his revolver.

He heard Workley come panting up the steps and across the terrace; then the window was burst open and the man sprang into the room.

In a moment he had seen Ralph, and, with a hoarse cry, extended his arm as if denouncing him; but for a time no words would come, and the cry was faint and almost inaudible from the stress of his emotion.

"Scoundrel!" he gasped at last. "Murderer! It was you—you—who killed her; and you shall hang for it! Put down that revolver! You're run to earth, you brute!—there are more in the front—the house is surrounded—there is no chance!"

Ralph lowered the revolver; he realised, even at that mo-

ment, that the sound of firing would bring the other pursuers upon him.

"Give me—give me a chance!" he gasped, the sweat running down his face, his bloodshot eyes distended. "I swear it—it was an accident! Give me a chance and I'll make it worth your while."

He snatched the notes from his pocket.

"Take—take half of these—just to let me pass—to keep quiet for five—ten minutes! For God's sake, give me a chance! Don't hunt a fellow-creature to death!"

Workley's white face went purple.

"Not if you offered me a million—not if my own life depended on it!" he cried, hoarsely; and, with a shout for help, he flung himself on Rath.

Ralph raised the revolver by the barrel and struck down at him with lightning rapidity. The blows fell like iron rain upon Workley's forehead, his grasp on Ralph relaxed, and he fell at his feet.

With savage fury Ralph kicked at the unconscious man as he sprang over him to the window. But there he stopped, for he could hear the sound of footsteps in the hall, and knew that his pursuers would see him flying across the lawn. He turned back and stood beside the door. For a moment he thought of locking it, but before he could do so, it was burst open and a detective sprang into the room. At sight of Workley lying on the floor he hesitated, and, blowing a whistle, went to him.

Ralph seized the chance offered by the man's momentary hesitation, and noiselessly stepping round the door, gained the hall. It was empty, though the butler and a footman were hurrying up, alarmed by the noise and the whistle, and Ralph sprang up the stairs. At the head of them he stopped. Parkins was in his room; there was no outlet there; he would be caught like a rat in a trap! With no definite plan, but impelled by despair, he ran down the corridor through a doorway at the end, and found himself in one of the passages which connected the old part of the ancient house with the more modern portion. He had never been there before, and he looked round him confusedly. As he did so, he caught sight of the detective running across the lawn, evidently under the impression that his prey had made his escape by the window.

Ralph hurried along the passage and reached a low door, which, on opening, he found communicated with a large lumber-room. The furniture was old and thick with dust, and

from several trunks came the musty smell arising from long stored-away and neglected clothes; at the end of the room was another door, and opening it with some difficulty, he found that he was in a disused dressing-room. Dust and cobwebs were thick over everything, and, as he went about on tiptoe, with hurried—one might say purposeless—movements, the rats darted across the room and disappeared in the broken wainscot. Breathing hard, shaking in every limb, with the blood-stained revolver still grasped in his hands, he sank on to a box and waited, resolved that he would not be taken alive.

He did not know whether it was an hour or a minute before he heard footsteps coming along the passage and the voice of Green the detective. Ralph sprang to his feet and waited, revolver raised; but, to his amazement, the footsteps and the voices passed, as it seemed to him, within a few feet of the left well, and so closely that he heard Green say:

"Not here; try that door!"

A moment after a breathless voice said:

"The horse has gone, Mr. Green! He's got away!"

And Ralph heard the men rapidly descending the stairs. He drew a long breath as he guessed what had happened. The horse had broken loose and led them on the wrong scent. Was there still a chance for him?

He flung himself down on the floor and fought against the sick tremor which possessed him; if he was to escape he would need all his cunning, all his presence of mind, and all the courage which he could wrest from despair.

He lay there, panting, in a cold sweat, for hours, afraid to move, almost afraid to breathe. The day waned, and the room grew dark with a darkness which was almost a relief to his racked nerves; for he could think now with something like acuteness.

He rose at last, and with cautious steps felt his way to the larger room, through the dirty windows of which the moon—the moon that had looked down upon the murdered woman's uplifted face—shone brightly. His eye fell upon one of the open trunks, and the sight of the clothes within it gave him an idea. From the dusty, moth-eaten heap he drew out a gown and a shawl, and with feverish haste slipped them on. In a cracked mirror he arranged the shawl over his head, and with no more definite purpose than that of escaping from the house, slowly and cautiously opened the door and gained the passage.

As correctly as he could judge, it was now somewhere about

eight o'clock; if the servants could eat at all under the circumstances, they were at supper. It was just possible for him to get clear of the house unobserved.

Slowly, listening at every step, he went down the back stair-way, and had reached the outer door of the small hall when he saw a servant coming along the passage. A candle was burning on a stand beside the door; there would be no time for him to unlock it before he was seen by the woman, unless he extinguished the light.

He snatched up the candle-stick, and—as is so frequently the case—the candle fell out. He put his foot on it and sprang for the door, but it was locked from the outside. The maid had seen him and sent up a shriek, and with an awful oath he turned and fled up the stairs.

As he did so, it seemed to him that a light was following him, moving with him; suddenly this light increased and spread to a flame, and he knew that the candle had ignited his dress; but he still fled upwards, followed by the shouts and screams of the women servants and the cries of the men, who, though they had rushed into the hall, stood there as if paralysed. With the flames still flaring round him, he ran like a madman towards the old lumber-room, swung the door to behind him, and with frenzied fingers tore at the burning garments. He got them off at last, and flung them, still alight, from him, heedless where they fell. With the strength of a madman, he dragged a heavy barricade against the door and piled the scarcely less heavy trunks on top of it.

While he was thus engaged—absorbed in his task—he was vaguely conscious that the room had grown light with another light than that from the moonbeams; but as he turned, he saw that the burning clothes had fallen on some rubbish on the floor, and that the room was in a blaze.

He sprang to the window, through the smoke which already rendered breathing difficult, and forcing it open, stepped out on to the wide ledge; but only to shrink back appalled.

He was standing at the top of the great house, with a space between him and the ground which no man could pass through and live.

The flames mounted higher as he stood clinging to the edge of the window, the smoke grew so thick and dense that he could not see through it. A roar as of a storm deafened him; voices clove through it now and again yelling "Fire!" and presently there came a hammering at the door and cries of:

"Open the door! Open the door!"

He laughed—he was raving mad, not with the madness of

despair—and seizing a chair, flung it, futilely, on the top of the barricade.

"Open it, if you can, d—n you!" he yelled, hoarsely.

Cries of horror responded to this taunt, and as he ran to the window, and was seen by the crowd below, other cries of terror, and even of pity, rose to him.

"Jump! jump!" yelled a voice.

He paused, looking down with eyes blazing from his blackened face, and it was thought that he would take the hopeless advice; but at that moment there was a crash, and he fell back into the room as the wall fell in with and buried him.

* * * * * * *

Two years later—just about the time the new Ratton Hall was nearing completion—three young persons were sitting, in the glow of a summer's evening, under the verandah of a luxurious bungalow, and looking out upon the exquisite view upon which Rath—and Stella—had so often gazed from the door of the old hut which this more elaborate and fitting building had replaced. But before the house was now a velvety lawn, and in the offing a yacht anchored; it had just arrived.

Rath was lying back in his hammock-chair, with his hands behind his head, his eyes resting dreamily upon his sweetheart—and his wife—who was watching a chubby boy playing on the lawn where his mother had sat when she told his father that she was a girl and not a boy.

But though her eyes were watching the future Earl of Ratton, half of Stella's mind was engaged in an argument with the third person present—a pale and thin, but extremely pretty, young lady who sat with clasped hands and a slight frown on her pensive face.

"What I say, Mary, is—is it fair? I do love fairness!"

"Hear, hear!" commented Rath; he had paid several visits to the House of Lords since his accession.

"Rath, I will not be mocked; especially before the child!" said Stella, severely.

"Who's mocking you, you little wild-cat? Besides, the little beggar doesn't understand; he's too young."

"I am not so sure. It is wonderful how he notices things, isn't it, Mary, dear? But I'm not going to be led off by a side-trail. I repeat: I love fairness, and I do not think you are fair, Mary."

"*I* think she is, now," Rath put in. "She isn't dark, anyway."

Stella turned her back on him with lofty and wifely con-

tempt, and continued, with that air of candour which only a woman can use with full effect, and then only to her own sex:

"If a man has done wrong, it is right that he should be punished."

"But if a woman has—let her off," murmured Rath.

"My dear Rath, if you cannot be quiet, hadn't you better go and play with Boy? Mary and I want to talk *seriously*."

"Poor Mary!" he commented, with deep sympathy. "Why don't you talk to one of your own size—to me, for instance?"

"Because I'm not fond of wasting my time. If a man has done wrong, punish him; but what wrong has Edward done, excepting in loving you?"

"That's man's folly, not his crime," commented Rath, suavely.

"It is you who have—have— There, don't cry!"

"I'm *not* crying!" retorted Mary, indignantly, but with a suspicious quiver in her voice.

"At any rate, you have no cause for complaint; you have nothing against him. For two years you have kept him at—at bay; have treated him as if he were a—a—convict, or a criminal not fit to enter your presence."

"No; it is I who am not fit," murmured Mary.

"Perhaps so," assented Lady Ratton, severely. "I can't argue that."

"One moment. Permit me to make a mental note that there is *one* subject upon which you cannot argue," murmured Rath.

"But he doesn't argue with you. He may be right or wrong, but anyway he persists in loving you and wanting you to marry him; and I think the least you can do—whether you love him or not—".

"I say," remonstrated Rath, "Boy *may* understand, you know, Stella."

—"Is to marry him. I speak to you before Rath, because—"

"You're afraid to speak to her alone."

—"Because there are no secrets between us three, and I know he agrees with me."

"Here, young party, don't give me away; you speak for yourself as you are too well able to do. Mary, get up and thump her; it's the only way."

"Oh, Mary!" continued Stella, with a change in her tone and a sweet tenderness in her eyes. "Do you mean to say that after all this time, after all his patient waiting and long-

ing, that if—if he were to come up the beach at this moment—"

It was strange, but at that moment a boat put off from the yacht and began to row to the shore.

—"You would refuse him? Would send him away with a broken heart, to drag out the rest of his life with that awful misery, that terrible misery—"

"There's a boat coming from that yacht that anchored just now," remarked Rath, rising. "I didn't expect anyone."

"You know what it is for us women; it is *worse* for the man—"

("Who told you so?" from Rath, but in a low voice, for his eyes were fixed on the boat.)

—"It is death in life; it is a daily, hourly torture; it is—"

Rath laid his hand upon her arm and looked significantly at the approaching boat; and she glanced up at his face, with eyes shining with suppressed excitement, and nodded.

—"Can you send him away to this life of misery, consign the man who loves you to unending unhappiness—"

"Hold on, Stella; she's crying!" whispered Rath.

Stella smiled fiercely, though the tears were in her own eyes.

—"Have pity on him, if you have none on yourself. He knows how you were driven, he has forgiven the past long, long ago. He— Mary, answer me! No, dear, not *me;* you shall answer *him!* Look, Mary! Look, dearest! He is coming—he is landing. The boat! See! Ah, Mary, have pity on both of you!"

Her voice was choked by a sob, and Rath, as he drew her inside the house, took hold of her by the arms and made her face him.

"You're a cool hand, I must say. You sent for him?"

"Y-es. It is Edward. And the Lisles have come with him."

"And you think— What do you think the answer will be?—poor dear old chap!" anxiously.

She smiled through her tears, her head on one side, listening to Edward's quick, firm steps as he came up to the quiet figure on the verandah. Stella smiled, and put up her mouth to him for answer.

"As if she could! Rath—you—you may kiss me, if you like!"

THE END.